Upper South

Eight Short Stories by Marc Brunton

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– Marc Brunton

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“They hold themselves above other southerners,
and with sound pretension.”

– H.L. Mencken

The Bestway Difference

Amber started working part-time—evenings, late evenings, and early mornings—because she needed the money. The place, Bestway Food Mart, was a long building with brightly painted white walls and floor to ceiling glass windows. The roof was lined with copper shingles that hinted at the beginnings of verdigris. It was situated at the end of a side-street that connected Gibbons Park to the parts of the city where people couldn't afford to send their children to Eastover for university. This location was very convenient for everyone, as there were tiny plastic cylinders filled thick with gourmet pimento cheese sold for seven dollars, for which hands were needed to grate the Tillamook cheddar and chop up the pimiento and jalapeno peppers, and to combine the ingredients with low fat mayonnaise and package it in neat little tubs. Bestway provided jobs for many people outside the neighborhood. When she was working, Amber ran the register.

She had moved five hours from her hometown to attend Eastover. Her father had made clear that if she was going to waste her life in a library, she was going to do it on her own. The acceptance letter had arrived Tuesday. If any local postal records existed, they would have revealed this was the first time a postmarked envelope had traveled from Eastover to her county. She was on the road by Friday. She'd applied to work at Bestway before her car had even been unpacked.

Amber had been enrolled as a full-time student for three semesters, until it became apparent that designation "full-time" was not a suggestion. No one on the Dean's List worked at Bestway. Her class average dropped and with it the money the school gave her. She had also plagiarized two Literature essays (Shakespeare; Milton), though these had not gotten the chance to catch up to her. But Amber still got to see her Eastover classmates every now and then when

they came to buy trail mix and meal-replacement shakes and coffee to drink during their eight o' clock classes. Just an hour earlier Hannah from American History had walked into the store around seven, and while Amber rang up her bottles of wine Hannah told her that she couldn't wait to have kids and walk them through her old college haunts. She would absolutely have to bring them by the old Bestway and introduce them to Amber.

The day she had dropped out of school, she'd printed out an application to Eastover and slid it into her purse. Her first night, she'd scribbled out her name at the top of the page. She'd called her father to find out her social security number. He hadn't picked up. She continued on to the address line and wrote down the location of the dorm room she'd just moved out of. Then she began Question 1: *Why Eastover?* A year and a half later, the application was almost half-completed. From time to time, she dropped a hand into her purse and ran a finger along the edges of the crinkled papers.

The early evenings at Bestway were always better than the late evenings. Amber watched the minute hand tick ever closer to eight o' clock. In the corner office, her manager paced around on the phone, probably yelling at the new hire who'd decided to quit stocking the shelves fifteen minutes early. The boy had jumped right onto his bike and pedaled out of Gibbons Park as if it was that easy to leave. Amber watched the manager's rapid-fire lips move behind the glass. She tried to read them, but they were so quick she could barely register more than a few words, and she was forced to draw on memory to fill in the gaps. Then the clock struck eight, the phone flipped shut, and the woman was out the door.

There was no one in Amber's lane (5), or any of the lanes. But now that the manager had left, she expected to see at least a few members of the recurring cast of Thursday night.

Accordingly, at 8:07 a familiar baby-faced man with golden hair and a denim jacket walked into the store. Amber called him Yellow Banana Bobby. He circled through the aisles with a large shopping cart, piling it high with hamburger meat and mangos and bunches of broccoli. He nodded to Amber when he saw her, then moved on to the Self-checkout.

"Please weigh your yellow bananas," the screen prompted in electronic staccato as Yellow Banana Bobby lowered a slab of tenderloin onto the machine. At forty-nine cents per pound, you couldn't beat yellow banana pricing.

Minutes later, a young woman slunk in, and without looking around walked up to the coolers and grabbed the first case of beer that presented itself. She kept her head down while Amber rang her up. Amber recognized her as one of her many underage regulars. They usually came by between 8:30 and 9:00, though many would stumble back through towards the end of her shift. The routine was the same as it always was, but this one wore a perpetual look of worry, as if Amber might change her mind at the last second and handcuff her to the card reader.

A few people slipped every fifteen minutes or so over the next half hour, but for the most part the Bestway settled back into its emptiness. In moments such as these, Amber longed for the robotic motion of hands grabbing groceries and the steady rhythm of the beeping. She missed the occasional excitement when a barcode wouldn't scan and a rodeo would ensue as she wrangled a carton of skim milk this way and that, moving every inch over the red light hoping for a miracle, praying for the sureness of the beep. All that was left when the store ground to a halt was to memorize the labels of whatever was in front of her (tonight it was cereal boxes) close her eyes, and attempt to recite them, an activity which had lost much of its value over time. Amber comforted herself with the certainty that the universe would one day reach thermodynamic equilibrium, and in its heat death the Bestway would be scrubbed from existence. She willed

entropy to hasten its movements, that the whole building from copper to concrete might deteriorate into an endless night of leptons and helium sooner rather than later.

10 o'clock signaled the official transition from evening to late evening. Amber drummed her finger nails against the black neoprene of the checkout conveyor belt. Zach from the Delicatessen window would be clocking out right about now. Bestway stopped selling turkey clubs at this hour, so there was no longer any need for the gaunt boy, who spent his days manning the meat slicer with dexterity unmatched for miles.

Zach approached Amber's lane, and without a word they made their way towards the bathrooms. On the way there, the boy made a detour to the storeroom. He returned with a mini-cooler in his hand. Amber walked inside. Zach waited a few seconds and then followed. Once inside, the two of them entered the handicap stall. He opened the cooler and removed an empty sports drink bottle that had a drill bit soldered into its orange cap. He took out a lighter and a plastic baggie from his back jeans pocket and packed the drill bit with its contents. There were holes at the very bottom of the bottle that allowed it to fill with water from the cooler. Zach submerged the bottom-half and lit the top of the drill bit. With graceful meat-carving hands, he slowly lifted the bottle. Water drained from the bottom and the plastic insides were displaced with smoke. Amber and Zach took turns inhaling its contents, the ritual signifying the beginning of the late evening shift. Like the changing of the guard, these rites operated on a strict schedule, initiated at every shift change and fifteen-minute break. The interstices of her evenings were marked by this routine of opening ceremony, intermission, and finale.

Amber sucked in with deep, desperate breaths and tried not to think about how many hours there were until four in the morning. Her final inhale caught in her throat and burned. The

violent hack of her cough resounded within the empty walls of the bathroom. Her head felt like it had been bagged by a checkout worker on their first day of the job, not yet aware that the gallon jug of orange juice was not to be thrown onto a foundation of egg cartons and peaches. With deliberate steps, she left the bathroom and slowly made her way back to Lane 5.

Amber leaned against the side of the checkout counter and stared straight ahead. The wall was closer to her than it had been before. The hum of the radiator could be heard from the utility closet at the far end of the store twelve aisles back. Royalty-free music drifted out of the speakers, transforming the Bestway into an elongated Otis elevator overstuffed with guilt-free ice-cream and thin-crust frozen pizza.

The produce section caught her inattention the most. Particularly the oranges. The new hire had stacked them into a perfect pyramid before he'd left. They'd been delivered overnight from a family-owned grove in St. Augustine, but now looked like they'd started to rot. The brightness of their pigment had drained out of them. Their skin appeared as though someone had muddled orange paint with the color of slush collected from the side of a busy street two days after a snowfall. Amber speculated that black mold must be growing in the air-conditioning vents that stood over the produce stands. The thought brought stomach acid up to her throat.

A lone customer approached Lane 5. He emptied his cart out onto the conveyor. Amber began scanning the items, but she could not stop thinking about the oranges. Her mind was filled with moldy gray peels, falling from their rotten fruit and landing on her skin.

"Please put the milk in a separate bag," said the customer. Amber had placed the jug on top of a case of strawberries. The strawberries in question looked just as rotten as the oranges, so she didn't see really see how it mattered if they got a bit squished, but she apologized. The milk seemed a couple days past expiration too. It looked like a sea of mercury as it sloshed from side

to side. The man could enjoy his food poisoning. He paid for his groceries and she handed him his receipt.

Amber's gaze returned back to the aisles. Even customers like him were a welcome break from the wall of bran cereals. The boxes, their labels long memorized, had demanded that she learn their slogans. She had gotten about halfway through earlier, and was able to recite the ideologies of over a dozen cereals from Original Bran all the way down to Fiber Flakes. But now the boxes appeared strange, as if they'd been misprinted at the factory. The bright purple on the Bowl of Bran logo looked sun-bleached. Amber's eyes began to flit between the aisles. The raincoat yellow of the potato chip bags was a sickly pale. The bananas looked chalky. Everything was a bit off, as if somewhere an ink cartridge needed replacing. The new hire was about to be out of the job, thought Amber. She didn't know how anyone could screw up stocking the store this badly.

Then another thought occurred to her. What if something was wrong? No, it had to be the bathroom and Zach and the cooler, that was all this was. But this had never happened before, not even on the days when she'd inhaled five, six, seven times in a single break. They smoked every day, three times a day, and there was such a thing as drug tolerance: she'd read an article in *Scientific American* about how after two weeks of continued use the effects of smoking should fall off by half. The discolored pyramid of oranges stood in stark contrast to the peer-reviewed evidence of the article. It had to be something else, something worse. The accumulated impact of the last year and half spent crouched in that stall. Now that seemed right. The more she thought about it, the more it made a lot of sense. In fact, there was no escaping it.

Amber had finally broken her brain. Somewhere in her occipital lobes an important bundle of neurons had been destroyed, or had gotten stuck in permanent synaptic misfire, or else

the microscopic dimmer switch nestled in her pale green irises had been jammed down to the lowest setting. Every time she blinked the colors of the store dropped a shade grayer. The shadows darkened around the farthest aisles, flickering the Danse Macabre along the rims of Bestway brand tomato soup cans.

Then, at 11:37, the front door swung open. The harsh click of footsteps pounded against her inner ears. Amber smelled the shoe polish first. Then she saw dark leather, ironed khaki, crisp linen, silk tie. Eastover's Dean of Admissions was in her Bestway. Their eyes met and he stopped. Their eyes locked for a few seconds. Then he turned the corner. She listened to his angry clicks disappear down one of the aisles.

She tried to steady her breathing as her eyes adjusted to the total gray of the Bestway. Her broken brain panic-raced with the realization the dean of admissions was here and he had remembered her. He had remembered her. She hastily smoothed her hair down, licking her palms and patting down the edges of frizz at the top. She jammed the edges of her polo-shirt uniform into her jeans. She grabbed a pack of peppermints from the mini-shelf of candy and gum attached to the checkout aisle. Her hands shook as ripped off the shrink-wrapped packaging. A pile of mints fell into her hand. She popped four into her mouth and crunched them like bran flakes.

Minutes later, the dean reappeared from the far-side of the store with a bottle of wine in his hand.

"I can get you over here," she called out.

He walked over to Lane 5. He handed her the bottle. The sound of the beep rang out sharply. The air-conditioning bellowed in her ears.

"Mr. Vance —"

The dean took a breath in through his pale, dried-up nose, scrunched it up, and frowned. He looked into her red-rimmed eyes.

"I wondered what became of you, Ms. Hormund." Placing the bottle under his arm, he walked out the door and into the night.

Her breathing quickened. Then she was gasping for air. Her lungs burned with smoke from the bathroom stall, twin plastic grocery bags constricting in her chest. She collapsed onto her knees. Her shaking hands barely kept her head above the linoleum and grime. It stuck to her fingertips, which were now just as gray as the floor. She was not thinking about the blackened pyramid of oranges, or the sterile color of the walls, or the fact that she might never see the blue of a robin's egg again. The dean had seen her. He had known. Amber gathered herself up and rose to her feet. Her hand lowered to her purse. She slid out her application and ripped it into pieces. The dust-colored fragments floated to the linoleum floor, her neat lines of cursive torn unintelligible. *Nam, Easto, plan, upwa, pursu, exce.*

She grabbed one of the hard-plastic dividers that customers used to separate their groceries on the conveyor belt. Triangular prisms, she remembered. A young girl had called them that once. She'd pointed at the divider and grabbed at the hem of her mother's dress and squealed with excitement at the familiarity of the shape. Amber brought it down hard against the side of the conveyer belt. It cracked in half. The other piece went sailing into Lane 6. She grabbed another and threw it at the nearest window. The floor to ceiling glass shattered into hundreds of shards. Stony moonlight spilled in through the hole and pooled around her lane. The roar of cicadas followed. They sounded as if they were getting closer.

Amber stared at the broken window. She had to blame it on the stock boy. He could just get another job. The Bestway was all that was left for her. She picked up a third divider and

walked over to the grocery wonder of the world. She swung, and the pyramid toppled. Oranges flew in every direction. They rolled off the stand like dark gray baseballs. She placed the divider on top of the stand where the produce architecture had once stood.

Amber walked back over to Lane 5. Her hands were still shaking. She tried to steady them against the side of the counter. She looked around the pallid building and smacked her skull with three sharp whacks. Then she hung her head. The scraps of her application were littered across the linoleum. She made a brief attempt to brush the pieces into a little pile. Her eyes, mouth, and the surrounding skin were little tracts of desert. Hot blasts of air blew in through the hole left by the divider. The humidity of the air brought no relief. Instead it coated Amber with a new layer of sweat, gathering on the base coat which had begun to form around the time she'd first noticed the oranges.

Suddenly a siren cut through the night. Seconds later there was a screech of tires as a police car screamed into the parking lot. Monochrome lights poured into the store, temporarily blinding her. An officer got out of the car, and spotting Amber through the window, called through the hole.

"Stay right there. There have been reports of a break-in. Is there anyone armed within the store?"

Amber yelled back to the officer there was not. He walked inside.

"What happened here?" he asked.

"I accidentally broke a window," she told him. "I tripped carrying a load of oranges."

The officer looked at the window and the pile of fruit on the ground. He did not notice the lack of cuts on Amber's arms and legs. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine."

"Who's in charge here?"

Amber gave the man her manager's number. He called her and told her that an employee had hurt themselves and that a window had been broken. Then he scribbled in his notepad, got in his car, and drove away. Amber kept still behind the register.

Five minutes later, her manager's car veered into the parking lot. She got out, took one look at the hole then threw open the door. She saw Amber and the pile of glass and the orange-covered floor. She noticed the lack of cuts on Amber's arms and legs immediately. She began to scream at her about the windows and the oranges and her employee performance over the past year and a half. There would, of course, be hell to pay. The glass pane had been custom-ordered. Amber was going to pay for a new one, of course. The manager was going to squeeze every last dollar of minimum wage from her that she'd ever earned. She was going to give the police all the employee addresses, and her and Zach were going to end up in prison for all the drugs she knew were stashed away in their rundown stoner hovels. Amber was never going to hold a job within a hundred miles of Gibbons Park ever again if it was the last thing she did.

"If it wasn't obvious, you're fired."

Amber walked out of the Bestway and sat on the curb of the sidewalk, underneath the dusky light of two streetlamps. She tried to process the last two hours. Her world would permanently look like a chalkboard. She would never set foot in the hallways of Eastover again. And she was unemployed. It occurred to her that an unexpected benefit to all this was that there was now zero risk of ever running into Hannah from American History and her future daughter while ringing up their groceries years down the line. She would likely never see any of her

classmates again, assuming the manager made good on her promise to blacklist her, which she almost certainly would once she looked over the camera footage from the night.

An option which had in fact always existed was suddenly thrust to the foreground, shouting her to her feet. Her bike sat chained to the row of racks that lined the sidewalk. She walked over and pulled off the lock, which had broken months ago and was now clasped only for appearances. She wrapped the coils around her wrist. As she walked her bike towards the road, she turned and caught a look at Bestway through the window she had broken. The manager was nowhere in sight. The store stood perfectly still.

In the morning, there would be glass to sweep up. The stock boy would gather up the oranges and begin the process of rebuilding his monument. The hole would be covered in tarp and taped down. A neighborhood kid had thrown a brick, or a worker had tripped while unloading the trucks and fallen through the glass. Zach would slice roast beef into beautiful, translucent cross-sections until his first break. He would glance towards Lane 5, and upon seeing it empty would continue to the bathroom. The cyclic movements of the Bestway would continue uninterrupted, kept on beat by the constant tone of the checkout aisle scanners.

Amber inhaled deeply, breathing in the aisles and shopping carts, the evening shifts, and the piles of darkened fruits. Slowly she exhaled it all, watching as it escaped her lips. For a moment, her world bled gold. The cereal boxes regained their shine. Color ran back into the oranges. Their sudden brightness hurt her eyes, as if she'd just stepped out of a darkened theater into a summer afternoon. The orange-covered floor became the sky, spotted with a spilled pile of miniature suns.

There was no way to know how long the color would remain. For now, all she could do was get on her bike. She could not stay in Gibbons Park even if she wanted to.

Senator

The senator is addressing a happy crowd of screaming North Carolinians. He is waving and smiling and banging his hand against the podium—from his early years at Hickory Grove Baptist, the father says. The Bickfords sit around the dinner table watching the address from the small television box that rests on the kitchen counter. The pot roast is finishing up in the oven. Mrs. Bickford has a no-television rule once food is on the table, so Annie and Milton and Mr. Bickford stare at the screen as if this was the first televised moon landing and not a Southern politician stumping for reelection. The senator is thirty-two. He has coal black hair that holds in place without looking oiled back, and pale eyes that a local news anchor once described as clearer than the water around Shackleford Banks. Mr. Bickford likes him for his stance on cotton protectionism. Annie and Milton like him because he sometimes tells jokes that even they understand. He is also a Merrimon, his mother the dear friend of Mrs. Bickford. They had been in boarding school together. Mrs. Merrimon used to stop by for dinner many times a month prior to the election of her friend's son.

Mrs. Bickford does not stare at the screen. She peers into the oven and pulls silverware out of the drawers and occasionally looks over her shoulder with a scowl. After the expression goes a third time unnoticed, Mrs. Bickford lets out a big sigh. Then she turns to her husband.

"I don't know how you can expose the children to that."

"What?" replies Mr. Bickford.

"Honestly, as someone who has a young daughter, it's despicable. What kind of example do you want to set for our son?"

Mr. Bickford, who has just begun to register that something is the matter, wheels around in his chair and faces his wife. "Honey, what's the matter? What the hell are you talking about?"

"Language Peter, for goodness's sake. Now could you please turn that filth off?"

Mr. Bickford fumbles with the remote and the television screen shoots to black. He is a proud man, in theory, and does not want this to be the end of the conversation, what with young Milton right there in the kitchen with them. "I see nothing wrong with having a boy get a taste of politics."

"It's not the politics that's the matter. It's him."

"The Merrimon boy? What could be wrong with him? We love the Merrimons. We donated money to his campaign. You were at the rally!" Each stretch of words rises a half-step higher into an anxious, perfect interval.

Annie and Milton look on at the scene with expectant faces, anticipating their mother's check hook and the knockout that will follow.

"The Merrimons are a family of snakes, he is no different, and you are disgusting for supporting him."

Despite twenty years of marriage, Mr. Bickford still seems surprised whenever she speaks to him like this. In his mind, the old rules of the game where challengers were forbidden from entering the ring still applies. But the proud man in theory has been knocked down so many times that the blows have interfered with his normal memory function. He gasps and stares at his wife with a frown, but cannot speak. Everyone seated knows the fact of the matter has been stated. Mrs. Bickford removes the pot roast for the oven and sets it down on the table with a deliberate plunk.

"What's wrong with the Merrimons?" asks Annie. She remembers quite fondly how Mrs. Merrimon had brought an orange crème cake to Thanksgiving a few years ago. Annie had eaten

three slices when her mother wasn't looking, and Mrs. Merrimon had slipped a fourth onto her plate when the rest of the adults went out onto the porch to smoke cowboy killers.

"They raised him," replies Mrs. Bickford.

"Well, what's wrong with him?" asks Annie.

Mrs. Bickford considers this for a second. "It's neither appropriate for the dinner table nor for young ladies such as yourself."

Annie begins to whine, and Milton follows suit. Mr. Bickford does not, though it wouldn't have been difficult for anyone to picture. "Listen to your mother," he says, soft-breathing the words in the way of suggestion. Mrs. Bickford frowns. She begins to cut the pot roast, sliding chunks of braised beef onto each person's plate.

"I will say this. So that you will all know what sort of behavior is unacceptable for boys and girls."

Mrs. Bickford pauses for effect.

"I got off the phone today with my friend Marie, who works down in the county commissioner's office. One of her work friends was at a fundraising ball for the senate campaign last weekend, this huge sort of party downtown at the Grovewood. And of course, Merrimon is there in the center of things like he always is, and he gets to talking and drinking with one of the young staffers who works for him. They stay off to the side talking for almost a half hour. At one point, Marie's friend sees her hanging on to the side of his jacket smiling and fondling that tacky state pin he always wears on his lapel. Then suddenly, she throws herself off of him and storms away. And it gets back around to the friend later that Merrimon had asked the young woman to do a disgusting thing."

Milton looks down at the table. A disgusting thing. Katie from his third period Biology class had said those exact words. Did everyone use those words to refer to the same thing?

"What did he ask her to do?" Annie asks.

"Quiet, Annie," replies Mrs. Bickford. "We don't discuss details like that in this family." Mrs. Bickford turns her attention to the pot roast, and makes a show of cutting the meat with excruciating focus.

"I bet I can guess what he asked her to do," Annie says. Mrs. Bickford looks like she might grab the carving knife from the table. Milton looks like he might throw up his last few bites of pot roast.

"You better pray to God Almighty that you can't guess, young lady, or you're going to end up with a lot of free time to spend thinking about it in your room. Children shouldn't speculate on such things."

Mr. Bickford sits turning in his chair. The earlier confrontation with his wife has already been tucked away.

"Honey, I agree with you about the kids. But that Merrimon is a great man. He's got great ideas. What he did was a bit inappropriate outside of marriage, but he's young. Certainly, we can forgive a young man for trying to have a bit of fun with a girl who likes him?"

Mrs. Bickford stands up and shoves her chair in. "What he asked her to do would not be appropriate inside or outside a marriage. It was a disgusting request. Humiliating." She picks up her plate, walks over to the trashcan, and dumps her dinner with a single slam of the plate into the plastic side. "I would hope that you would never have the indecency to make such a request of me. But you seem to have made your stance clear." Mrs. Bickford leaves her plate in the sink and walks outside onto the screen porch, slamming the door behind her. Mr. Bickford sits in his

chair, his eyes wide. He is not sure what exactly he has implied he'd ask his wife to do, or how he has, but he can tell he shouldn't have. He turns towards the children, who are now staring at him.

"You kids listen to your mother," he says. Then he stands up, pushes in his chair, and walks upstairs. His plate of pot roast remains on the table, still steaming from the oven. Annie and Milton look at each other, then out the window towards the screen porch. Mrs. Bickford stands smoking with her arms crossed. She breathes out big angry clouds that make both children independently think of the dragon from Revelations Chapter 20, Verses 1 and 2 that they learned about at Sunday School last week. Every weekend they go to a special service for middle schoolers where the discussion leader treats the Bible stories like a series of action-heavy movies where Jesus is the too-cool hero. The dragon only featured in two verses, but the leader had found a way take up an afternoon with the subject.

The two children wordlessly eat their food. Neither of them leaves any scraps. They scrub their dishes in the sink with extra hot water, then dry them with a white dish rag, taking care not to miss any droplets. They wash and dry their mother's dishes too, just to be safe. Then the two of them trudge upstairs, each to their own rooms, to wait out their parents' argument.

Milton walks into his little green room with his head down. He closes the door behind him, twisting the lock to a horizontal position. He jiggles the knob to check that it has fastened. His mind races from Merrimon to the campaign party to the young woman. He thinks about Katie from Biology again, his main focus since the television was turned off. She'd promised Milton that she would not say anything to anyone. She had said no, and that was that, and he'd looked worried so she'd promised him. Milton turns off the lights. He does not want to be like

the senator. But the question of where to start hangs unanswered, until the thought wears him out.

■

The Northfield Foxtrot

The dirt road up the mountain was lined with ditches and rocks, but neither of the Hayeses could tell from inside Montgomery's new convertible. The wheels were outfitted with electrohydraulic suspension, the latest in shock absorption technology, which Lucille had heard all about the day Montgomery got back from the dealership and suggested they go for a ride. But she hadn't noticed any difference that day as they shot through the streets of Gibbons Park. The roads in her neighborhood always felt freshly paved. They reminded Lucille of the cuts of onyx kept behind glass at the jewelry stores she accompanied her mother Catherine to.

The dirt road they now glided up would ordinarily have made Lucille carsick. Montgomery had purchased the suspension in anticipation of many such trips up the mountain. It will pay for itself after just a few rides, he had told Lucille. Half a year later, this was the Hayes' first trip to the Northfield Institute for Girls. They were heading to the fifth event of the year, Family Day, which was to begin with a barbecue picnic and was to end with a father-daughter dance billed as *The Ball of Forgiveness*. It was just Montgomery and Lucille on this trip. Catherine was competing in an important golf tournament, or was home sick, depending on who was asking. Lucille did not understand why she could not spend her university's fall break at the green with her mother, or with her old friends from Belmont High School. Her parents were the ones that had done such a bang-up job raising Daisy. Lucille wanted brunch reservations at Brookside and orders of lobster Benedict. She wanted dinner reservations at the Domani and after-dinner sips of scotch from her father's liquor cabinet, always left unlocked whenever she came home.

It was apparent to Lucille that the best thing Montgomery and Catherine could do for their daughter would be to leave her alone at Northfield for the entire length of the program.

Going to Family Day now would be like tampering with a treatment group halfway through the experiment. It was bad enough the way they sent care packages every other week. Lucille had read the Northfield Institute's instruction pamphlet for parents front to back. The theory behind the program, she remembered reading, was that austerity has always been the second-cousin to gratitude. Lucille did not see how the stripped-down mountain residence, which housed girls aged twelve to seventeen, could ever teach anything of the sort if the parents turned it into sleep away camp.

Lucille stared out the window from the front seat of the convertible. They'd closed the roof earlier, on account of the wind whipping her curls apart. As they drove the spaces between houses grew larger. The clumps of election signs that had dotted the freeway transitioned into thick clumps of weeds and grass. Lucille had enjoyed pointing out which of her fathers' friends she'd recognized, Jones for County Commissioner, Merrimon for Senate, Ruthwood for District Attorney. If Montgomery had asked about the weeds, she could have pointed out *puerari lobata* and *geranium carolinianum* growing by the dogwoods. But Lucille knew her audience enough to stay silent on subjects that would fail to interest him. This had been one of Montgomery's early political lessons, and as the firstborn Hayes she could never over-practice.

The road curved at sharper angles as the incline became ever steeper. The sides of the road seemed intent on converging, as the road narrowed into little more than a trail. Lucille entertained the possibility that the car might toss over the edges into the endless thick of eastern pines. At the point where the path could get no more treacherous, the road suddenly flattened out and spilled into a large clearing of rolling hills. At its peak stood an expansive brick and stone structure with a covering of slate. The building was surrounding by a white ring of magnolias.

Lucille took note of the architecture immediately. The choice to build a mansard roof over a classical marble entranceway disturbed her to no end.

"Beautiful place, isn't it?" Montgomery said. "Lucky Daisy. I'd never want to leave."

Lucille gave her father a smile. "She'd be hard-pressed to find anything worth complaining about. Though I'm sure she's found a way by now."

Montgomery laughed. Lucille tried to keep a straight face, but found herself chuckling a bit despite herself.

Montgomery smiled. Then his face softened. He turned from the wheel to look his daughter in the eyes. "Your sister needs your love right now."

Lucille snapped her head back towards the window. Those words had been among her father's favorites throughout her childhood. When she was twelve, Daisy had been sent to her room for talking back to Montgomery. Then she'd ripped every picture off the wall in the sisters' shared bedroom. Lucille had walked into their room to find the willow tree painting Catherine had brought her from France reduced to a pile of glass and torn canvas. She remembered grabbing for pieces amongst the shard, trying to put them back together, tears in her eyes.

And she remembered screaming for her parents. Catherine had gone for her belt. Montgomery had stopped her. Daisy was sent outside, the painting was swept into a trash bag, and with it the incident. When Lucille went to her father that night, he had picked her up in his arms and told her, "Your sister needs your love right now."

The phrase had been making a comeback since Daisy had left Belmont High School for Northfield. Lucille said nothing and Montgomery kept on driving.

The Hayeses made it to the end of the road and pulled into a parking lot indiscernible from a well-worn field, save for the wooden posts that stood at each corner and the rows of neatly parked sports cars and SUVs. Montgomery pulled in beside a yellow convertible of the same model. “Like mine,” he said to himself. He turned to Lucille. “Clearly a man of good taste.” He stood there examining the car for a few seconds. *He’s jealous he didn’t go with the yellow*, Lucille thought. He’d mentioned the color choices extensively the day he’d brought the car home. “Black’s a professional color,” he’d explained.

“He probably didn’t get the electrohydraulic upgrade like I did. Poor bastard must be throwing up behind the building,” Montgomery said. Flashing teeth, he walked up towards the marble entrance. Lucille followed behind him.

A woman stood at the entrance to the building behind a plastic fold out table. “Welcome to the Northfield Institute for Girls,” she said with a smile. “Can I get your name please?”

“Montgomery Hayes.”

The woman scanned the table until she found their nametags. Then she flipped through a clipboard. “Is your girl Daisy Hayes?”

“That’s her. I’ve got two daughters. This one is my oldest, Lucille.”

“It’s good to meet you both. We’re glad you could finally make it up.”

The woman handed them both their nametags. She then withdrew a remote from her pocket. She pressed the large plastic button in the center. A click sounded from behind the tall, oak doors. “Go right on in,” the woman told them. “If you will take a seat in the waiting room, the girls will be out soon. Feel free to grab some complimentary coffee while you wait.”

Montgomery and Lucille made their way into the foyer of the building. The walls were a light green that suggested spring. A pencil sketch of the structure and the grounds hung on the

wall, etched with the style of a 20th century draftsman. Lucille guessed it had been commissioned within the last five years. There were two leather couches facing each other from opposite walls. On each side of the couches were armchairs with floral upholstery. Off to the side was an antique coffee cart with wheels and gilded metal sides. Couples sat talking quietly amongst themselves, or else stood in clumps off to the side. There were a few younger children running around, burning off the drive.

Lucille poured herself a cup of coffee, then made one for Montgomery. He had fixed himself off alone in the corner of the room. He stared straight ahead, his eyes trained on the graphite markings of the wall art. The great Montgomery Hayes looked sick to his stomach. His face was red. He seemed determined not to make any eye contact with anyone. She handed him the cup.

"I just surveyed the room. I didn't see anyone from the Ruthwood campaign. Or Gibbons Park."

"Why would that matter?" Montgomery asked. "We're all here to support our children. I'd love to see some Ruthwood folks here, we can do some strategizing while we wait."

Lucille watched the tension fall from his shoulders.

"Well, I'll keep a lookout then."

"You do that." Montgomery put his arm around her and pulled her in for a quick hug.

There was a click behind the doors to the left of the foyer. Then they swung open. A single-file line of girls in steely gray uniforms emerged in step. At the head of the line marched Daisy. Her face was expressionless and pale, as if carved from the marble of the entryway. She led the line into a semi-circle formation around the couches. At her command, the entire line stopped in unison. The gray bodies snapped into place and stared straight ahead. The side doors

clicked again, and a woman in a business suit stepped through the entrance. Her shirt matched the color of the uniforms, but her jacket was black and slick. Her shoes were black leather studded with little black bumps, which Lucille immediately recognized as ostrich. The woman strode across the room to the middle of the semi-circle. The group could have been a military choir: the suited woman lead vocals for "Battle Hymn of the Republic," the uniformed girls humming back-up.

"Welcome, loved ones, to the Northfield Institute for Girls. My name is Dr. Maribel Proctor, Director of Programming. We're so happy to have everyone here for this tremendous occasion. This Family Day marks significant progress for all of our young minds and hearts. We are so very excited to show off these new and improved girls to all of you." When she spoke, her arms flew up in the air, rising and falling with every other word. Even the junior politicians Montgomery signed off on had more shame. Lucille sent a quick prayer to the Romans of old, begging architectural and oratorical forgiveness on behalf of the Institute.

"As many of you know, this is our fifth event of the year. To those of you who have been dedicated enough to make it up each time, we offer our sincerest thanks. To those of you who are just now joining us, we are glad that the effort has been made. It is important for the success of the program that this journey is undertaken by everyone." Dr. Proctor stopped speaking and began to rotate her head around the room like an owl, stopping at each face to stare into their eyes. It was easy to tell who had been to the Institute before. The newer parents squirmed around, while the mothers and fathers on their fifth events met her gaze with a smile. When she got around to the Hayes family, Lucille met her gaze without blinking. She thought about the ostrich shoes and gave the woman a cold smile.

"Families take note. In a way, we are all part of the program here at Northfield. You may not have been the one who cried in class and picked fights with your algebra professor and sulked around the bedroom like a sad little sack of sadness, but does that mean you were not involved? Do we not all serve a part in the family dynamic? Do not all of our actions ripple like butterflies' wings? Those beautiful little creatures can cause hurricanes. Remember that."

She paused, and the five-event parents led the way with thunderous applause, followed by a delayed smattering from the rest of the room. "Now, I'd like for you all to hear from one of our best students, perhaps our biggest success story yet. She's going to introduce the schedule for the day. Daisy, take it away."

Lucille watched her sister take Dr. Proctor's place in the middle of the circle. Daisy seemed taller than she had remembered. She realized it was the posture. The real Daisy walked with slumped shoulders, eyes to the floor. This new stance was artificial. It didn't count as confidence if she was only doing it on command. Lucille imagined Dr. Proctor rehearsing the motions with all the girls a week before, teaching them little tricks to perform for all the parents. *Feet together. Back straight. Eyes ahead.*

Daisy smiled as she spoke. "Welcome, everyone, to the Northfield Institute for Girls Family Day. We are all so deeply grateful to have you all here to support us in our journeys. We've got a whole lot of fun planned for you today. In a moment, we are going to head down to the back lawn for a barbecue picnic. The twist is that my program sisters and I cooked all of the food ourselves, so it's going to be homemade and delicious. We are going to act as your servers for the afternoon, as a way to honor you all for the sacrifices you have made for us. After that, there is going to be a Family Walk through the grounds, in which each family gets a chance to spend some time alone together. And of course, we will end the night with the grand finale, *The*

Ball of Forgiveness, Northfield's famous father daughter dance. Don't worry if you're not a father, there's going to be lots of great snacks to enjoy for all those who aren't dancing. I'm so excited to share this Family Day with all of you, and I know all of my program sisters are as well."

Montgomery elbowed Lucille. "Pretty good stuff, huh? I bet you never thought you'd see your sister speak like that, did you?"

"It was very impressive. I've never heard a schedule recited with such gusto."

Montgomery laughed again. "Don't write your sister off just yet, Ms. Hayes. I think you've got some competition. I just might have to make Daisy the successor to the party."

"I can't blame you. You've got to lock down the country club activity planner vote somehow. And of course, the cruise ship announcers. They're make or break in North Carolina."

"Be nice to your sister. She's made some great improvements."

"I know. I'm just kidding around."

Lucille had nothing to worry about. It was Daisy, after all. Nineteen years of spelling bees, report cards, and swim meets had long declared a winner. Lucille attended one of the nation's top universities. Daisy would be lucky to end up part-time at the neighborhood grocery store. She remembered something Catherine had always told her, on the nights they had commiserated about Daisy, wondering aloud what they were going to do about her. "Private schooling means nothing if you don't have it together," she'd told Lucille. "Belmont can't do anything for you if you don't work hard. Don't you dare waste it like your sister. Don't you dare waste it." Lucille never knew what to say in those moments. "I grew up with nothing," her mother would say. "Private school. We would have never imagined it."

Behind the Institute, an array of fold-out tables and chairs were spread across the rolling fields. They had been painted a shade of white a few tones brighter than the magnolias. It seemed to Lucille a deliberate attempt on Dr. Proctor's part to put the trees to shame. Lucille and Montgomery were seated at a table with a couple from Tennessee. They'd introduced themselves as the Buckleys. Their daughter Joan was thirteen. She'd been in the program for five months.

"Well, she sealed herself in her room and was threatening to stay in there until she died of dehydration. And her brother yelled through the door don't you mean starvation and she told us no, because a person can live more than three weeks without food but they can't do more than three days without water." Mr. Buckley was grinning. "Joanie could be seconds from death and she'd use the last few ones to set your facts straight on something. But that was the final straw. It was the nailing the door shut that really did it though." Mr. Buckley couldn't contain himself and began to howl, his cheeks swelling red with the effort.

Lucille tried to ignore Mr. Buckley. The image of the little girl driving nails through her bedroom door could have too easily been superimposed onto her own childhood memories. Beside him, Mrs. Buckley kept her eyes down. Lucille pictured her mentally going through the list of all the exits she would need to take before they would be back in Knoxville and away from here, where the flaws of her husband were the most pronounced.

After a minute, Mr. Buckley regained enough composure to begin speaking again. "So, Montgomery, what was your last straw?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"What was the moment that brought you to send Daisy to a damn place like this? What tipped you and your wife and your lovely daughter here over the edge?"

Montgomery's face turned the color of the Northfield uniforms. His finger wrapped around a frayed piece of wood that had splintered from the table. He twisted the wood, faster and faster, as if the moment it broke from the grain he would have his answer.

"It was an accumulation of things," Lucille said. "We discussed it as a family for a long period of time and then arrived at a deliberate decision. Hayeses don't blindly react in response to disasters." At this cue, Montgomery released the piece of wood and turned to face the Buckleys.

"Well said, Lucille."

Mr. Buckley continued on smiling as if Lucille hadn't said anything. The conversation went on, but she could not stop thinking. There had been the threat and the flash of steel. The frantic phone call to Montgomery, the sirens that pierced through the propped kitchen window. Cabinet contents spilled across the floor, the glint of a copper frying pan, pots, dozens of forks, soup spoons, butter knives. And the words. *You. You. It's sisters like you. Makes sisters like me.*

At the top of the hill, the program girls descended the tables, balancing a metal platter on each hand. Daisy came into view, wearing the same smile from her welcome speech.

"I've got pulled pork sandwiches and enough baked beans to drown the Carolinas."

Close at her heels trotted a much younger girl who Lucille guessed was Joan. She held a pitcher of lemonade in one hand while balancing a stack of six glasses in the other. She didn't carry a look like the one Daisy had worn all morning. Her lips were closed tight with the points slightly upturned. She looked like a girl Lucille had known back in middle school. The girl's mother must have taught in early childhood that it wouldn't hurt as much if you pretended not to care. She would stand in the middle of the blacktop at recess where they would always come for

her, and would scrunch her face just like Joan, as though she could not help but agree that her clearance outfit hung from her body in a way no one enjoyed.

"Looks like the help just arrived. Hey, Joanie, what do you got for us today?" Mr. Buckley said, though the pitcher was covered with painted lemons and sloshed with yellow.

Joan raised the pitcher up in the direction of the table.

"For God's sake, I don't know why I'm wasting hundreds and thousands of my god damn dollars if you're not even going to answer us when we talk to you."

"It's lemonade," Joan said, looking out past the magnolias at the tree line.

"Well then, I believe you ought to offer the Hayeses something to drink."

"We'd both love some," Lucille said. Joan walked over to her and began filling the glasses.

Daisy set the platters down on the table. "Shall we get started?" she asked. Lucille had never heard of waitresses taking lunch with the people they served, but she didn't offer up any words on the subject. She did not want anyone to think she was aligned with Mr. Buckley. New-money white trash, she thought. All four-hundred and forty miles of Tennessee was a barren waste lined with Styrofoam mansions, complete with their own Mr. Buckley. Northfield must be like Versailles to men like that.

Mr. Buckley heaped a thick pile of barbecue onto his plate. "Did y'all see my yellow convertible when you pulled up? She's a damn beauty. I had her outfitted for this damn mountain terrain too. Cost me five thousand extra."

After lunch, Daisy reminded everyone that each family would now have a few hours free to take a Family Walk before everyone got ready for the dance. She loaded everyone's empty

plates onto her silver platter and trotted up the hill, Joan trailing behind with the empty pitcher and glasses. The remaining four stood up. Mr. Buckley and Montgomery dusted cornbread crumbs from their Oxford shirts.

Lucille eyed the forest line. She could make out little openings that she guessed were the trailheads. The forest itself looked like it might have a few old-growth trees, but a lot of what she'd seen on the way up had looked newer, thin tulip poplar trunks that had shot up from a clear-cut ground. She remembered the Northfield handbooks opening pages, how it claimed that the Institute stood amongst magnificent pines as old as the first people of Appalachia. Miles of stunning trails, to teach their girls the importance of the natural world, that there was even a world that existed beyond themselves. Gibbons Park had trees that were much older, hundred-year-old oaks left behind from when the neighborhood had been a green space for the first residents of the city. The neighborhood stood in a perpetual shade, comfortable to stroll through even in the hottest days of August. Fifteen years amongst those trees and Daisy had still become a Belmont dropout. Lucille wasn't sure how an imitation forest stood to do much better.

A few minutes later, Daisy and Joan returned from the building. "How do you all feel about a group Family Walk?" Mr. Buckley asked.

"If it's all right with you, Mr. Buckley, I'd like to get a little bit of time alone with my sister," Lucille said. Joan dropped her head. There would no longer be anyone to serve as witness, to understand and sympathize that it was her father, not her, who belonged at Northfield. But that was beyond Lucille's control, and anyway, she was sick of them all. Mr. Buckley for speaking, Mrs. Buckley for her passivity, and Joan for dragging them into her life for an afternoon. She turned and started towards the nearest trailhead, Montgomery and Daisy following close behind.

Once underneath the cover of trees, they fell in step beside each other. For five minutes, nobody spoke. Leaf litter crunched beneath their feet. A hawk-like cry sounded in the distance. Lucille recognized it as a blue jay, its call mimicking the bird of prey with an assurance that would fool even the most discerning of birds. Montgomery spoke first.

"That was really delicious barbecue. You girls made that yourselves?"

"Everything but the lemonade. That was store-bought."

"You'd think with the money we pay that we'd at least get some freshly squeezed lemonade."

"I'll make sure that Dr. Proctor hears your concerns."

Montgomery thought this was very funny. Lucille didn't laugh. Whenever Daisy wanted something from him, she transformed from a nonresponsive heap into a bubbling little extrovert. *Wink, wink. Elbow, elbow.* Giving your father the business, Catherine had always called it. "If she keeps it up, you can forget more than Belmont. She keeps it up and we'll be dirt poor." But there was nothing she could ask for now that she wasn't already getting from the packages. Nothing she was allowed to wear besides that gray uniform.

"How have you been, Lucille?" Daisy asked. "I've missed being around the Belle of the Carolinas. How's that Boston weather been treating you?"

"It's been good. It's like mountain weather but with the added twist of living somewhere nice."

"Stop it Lucille," Montgomery said. "This place is beautiful. I'm sure Daisy is loving every minute."

"I really am. I've learned so much here. I've had a lot of time to really reflect. And I have to say, I feel terrible for everything. While nothing can ever be pinned on one person, I am ready to take responsibility. I'm ready to be better."

"That's excellent. Really excellent. I'm so proud of you," Montgomery said.

Lucille could sense what was coming and was determined to head it off. "That is excellent. Another six months, and you'll be a whole new woman."

"That's just it, actually. I think I've gotten everything I can from this program. I'm not the same person. Can I please come home? I miss all of you so much."

"The Northfield Institute specifically outlines a year-long program," said Lucille. It's in the instruction manual."

In order to ensure the success of our girls, we ask that you allow us twelve months of noninterference. After twelve months, the girl will be evaluated, and it will be decided if another twelve months is necessary. Lucille had circled that passage, and then starred it. But neither Montgomery or Catherine had ever gotten around to reading it.

"That rule's only there for the nutcases. It's there for the girl who was shooting up in her high school bathroom. It's there for the one who assaulted her math teacher and burned her family beach house down. You can't really compare me to girls like that. Just because I had a few meltdowns here and there. Everyone fights with their siblings. Everyone gets a little depressed sometimes."

"Sometimes," said Lucille.

"I've gotten a handle on all of that now. I'm sharing a room with three other girls and we're the happiest quadruplets in the world."

The blue jay's cry echoed again through the trees. A wren answered with a high-pitched yammer, insistent on being noticed. All around, the newly planted poplars reached towards the canopy of the forest. Their branches grasped at the air, competing for the few slivers of daylight that shone through the slits of the taller trees, the ones planted immediately after the plot of land had first been cleared. Lucille stared up at the sunlight and wondered what Daisy had managed to convince those three girls of. Perhaps they now believed they'd grown up in Gibbons Park too. They'd never given Daisy enough love. Bad sisters. If they'd just given her more love. But they were guilty, guilty. That's what Daisy would whisper as they all sat in their hard bunk beds waiting for another day at Northfield to start, waiting to slip on their gray uniforms and step into formation and lie to Dr. Proctor about getting better every day now.

"Well," Montgomery said, "that does sound like a lot of progress. I'll tell you what. I'll talk to Dr. Proctor tonight and see what she thinks. But I'd love for you to come home."

"Oh, I'm so unbelievably happy!"

A year before she'd left for Northfield, Daisy had decided on a whim to play beautician and cut her own hair. She'd grabbed scissors from the kitchen and then began to trim, starting from the sides. Then she cut a clump of front hairs a bit too short. She started cutting every which way, jerking the scissors back and forth until she had the ugliest, most lopsided tantrum bangs Lucille had ever seen. When Catherine walked into the kitchen and found her on the floor, she'd told Daisy she would have to live with the decision. "You're going to march to Belmont tomorrow morning exactly like that. I'm not paying for another haircut just so you can go fuck it up again." Lucille considered her sister's hairline as Montgomery spoke. Pulled back tight and perfectly linear. Not a single strand was out of place.

"Remember that time you tried to cut your own hair?" Lucille asked.

"Of course," Daisy said with a laugh. "You told me mine would never look like yours."

"Remember that, Montgomery?" Daisy asked.

Lucille pulled the long black dress she'd packed for the ball over her head. She stood between the stalls and the sink of the guest bathrooms, off the right hallway of Northfield's foyer. The sink basins were polished soapstone adorned with bright copper faucets. A floral couch that matched the waiting room stood off to the side near the door. A few of the mothers were changing in the stalls. *Self-conscious mothers raise self-conscious daughters*. The Ball of Forgiveness was set to start within the next half-hour. There had been no mention of dinner. *No budget for more than a barbecue lunch and a snack table. But at least the bathrooms would impress the Buckleys.* She suspected Dr. Proctor had done all of Northfield's interior design herself. She quickly folded her clothes and placed them in her leather duffel.

Montgomery was waiting for her in the hallway, wearing a seersucker suit and a dark blue tie. A tiny enamel N.C. flag was pinned to his lapel. He always called it his state suit. *"Forget the lion and the fox,"* he'd told her the first time he'd worn it. *"Be the peacock."* They dropped their bags by the growing pile beside the waiting room couches, where a bustling Dr. Proctor had instructed them to leave their things. "You don't have to worry about anyone stealing but yourselves. Even our newest girls have learned to be better than that."

A growing crowd had begun to gather in the waiting room as families of suits and dresses slowly spilled from the bathrooms. Lucille spotted Mr. Buckley, all paisley from head to toe. She avoided eye contact and the man made his way over to another pair of families.

"I can't wait to get home," Lucille said. "Can we leave after the first few dances?"

"It'll be over before you know it," Montgomery said. "If you're good, I'll let you drive the car part of the trip."

The door to the right clicked and Dr. Proctor emerged in a flowing gray dress. A silver brooch dotted the left strap. It was an ornate sterling backing with a giant white jewel the size of a fist. With a swoop of her hand, she gestured the crowd to follow her through the door and down the hallway. Everyone got quiet. The families formed a line and began to march through the door. Lucille felt like she was in kindergarten again, walking silently to lunch because a single person had been disruptive in class. Some frenetic little idiot like Billy Waterford would interrupt the teacher with the latest joke he'd heard on the playground and then everyone got punished. Single-file silence. She would never forget how that felt, how her cheeks burned as the other grades watched them walk to the cafeteria in a funeral dirge. If she could go back, she would grab Billy by the collar before class, push him against the wall and dare to talk while Ms. Rosie was talking.

The hallways were cinderblock painted the same color as the Northfield uniforms. There were doors on either side of the hallway spaced just a few feet apart. Lucille wondered if the hallway would ever end. It looked like these were dorm rooms, but the number of doors surprised her. There hadn't seemed to be that many women assembled that morning. Maybe only the good ones got to come out. Or maybe all the girls had fathers like Montgomery.

At last they arrived at the door at the end of the hallway. With another click, the door opened and Lucille was greeted by a semi-decorated cafeteria that looked just like Belmont High during homecoming. Plastic lunch tables had been pushed off to the side to make room for dancing in the center. There was a pitcher of punch, a few bowls of chips, and a plate of chocolate chip cookies arranged on one of the tables. A few streamers extended across the room,

intertwined with string lights. A paper banner read *THE BALL OF FORGIVENESS* in giant painted block letters. Underneath the banner stood the Northfield girls, arranged just as they had been that morning. They were still wearing their uniforms. Dr. Proctor walked across the room and took her place in the middle of the semi-circle of girls.

"I want to thank all of you for joining us for another fantastic Family Day. I hope you've enjoyed our girls as much as I do. I bet some of them aren't even recognizable to you anymore! We are going to close out the night with a Northfield tradition, the annual Ball of Forgiveness. Your families are broken. Everyone has a lot of fault to share. But tonight, we are going to come together. We are going to say 'I forgive you.' Fathers, as the music starts, please find your daughters. Physically, symbolically, you must reconnect again in the first dance of the night. So, without further ado, let the ball begin! I trust you all know how to foxtrot."

Dr. Proctor walked off to the side and pulled a boom box from behind one of the tables. She pressed play and the room filled with grainy blasts of *Fly Me to the Moon* covered by a dollar-store Sinatra. Montgomery left Lucille's side and walked towards Daisy. They met in the middle of the room, the first ones to connect. He extended a hand and pulled her into closed position. Then they were off, gliding around center stage in perfect 4/4 time. Off to the side, other fathers looked to the pair to figure out how to begin.

Lucille hung back around the table. As fathers and daughters connected on the dance floor, she realized how few people were left standing off to the side. There were some mothers, but none of the children from before. The remaining parents must have hung back with them. She was the only young person in the room not from Northfield. *Not that surprising that a bunch of only children end up here*.

"Hello there." Dr. Proctor had moved while she wasn't looking and was now standing before her with an arm outstretched.

"Hello. Lucille Hayes."

"Oh, the other Hayes sister. I'm very familiar." Dr. Proctor was looking at her the way her old middle school principle Mrs. Froddam used to. She was a strange woman who had never liked Lucille, despite her perfect grades and attendance, despite the fact that she had never once been sent to her office. Always the raised eyebrow, the suspicious tone, as if she couldn't believe a child could be that perfect.

"Well, Lucille, I'll be perfectly frank. Reformation is a holistic process." Dr. Proctor waited for her to nod in acknowledgment before she continued. "The entire family must be healed before any individual person can be. We could find a place for you here too. I'm a firm believer in joint family processing."

"I'm sure you are," Lucille said. She looked the woman square in the face. "If you'll excuse me, doctor."

The fathers and daughters spun around and around in the middle of the auditorium. Lucille watched the two of them dance. Every few moments, Daisy's mouth would move and Montgomery would laugh. They spun and smiled and kept on going even after the song ended, dancing through the few seconds of silence until the brass of the next track blared. Soon she would be back in Gibbons Park and it would be as if nothing had changed. In between turns, she caught Daisy smiling at her.

The wind whipped through Lucille's hair as Montgomery shot down the mountain. It was a while past 10 o' clock. There were no stars out and no streetlights, just the beam of the convertible's headlights. The cold blasts of air felt good against her face.

"That was really something, huh Lucille? Can you believe Daisy? It's incredible."

"I can't."

Montgomery had his tie pulled loose and the top button undone. "I feel really good about things. Things are going to be really good from now on."

The car whipped around a tight curve but neither felt a thing.

"Remind me to call the dealer about this baby. I've never been more impressed with a car." Montgomery said. "Oh, and Lucille. I talked to Dr. Proctor. I asked her about pulling Daisy out early and she told me that would be fine. And you'll be happy to know she said it wouldn't interrupt the flow of the program. She's made progress a lot faster than the rest of the girls."

Lucille waited for a few seconds before answering Montgomery. She looked back behind the car, as if maybe someone from Northfield had followed them.

"There's something you need to know."

"What's that?"

"I met one of Daisy's roommates during the ball. She came up to me beside the snack table and we started talking and I mentioned that Daisy would probably end up leaving soon. And she told me that Daisy had been planning this since she got here. She played along with the counseling and the activities and acted really nice whenever Dr. Proctor wanted something. But when they're alone in the bedrooms at night, she rips her sheets off the bed and screams into her pillow and tells all the girls they're terrible program sisters."

"Jesus, Lucille. Jesus. Do you believe her?"

"What would she have to gain from lying?"

The convertible moved in silence for a long time. Lucille looked at the dark outline of her father's face, barely lit in the soft red glow of the dashboard. The lines along his forehead and between his eyebrows were wrinkled into deep fault lines. The flesh around his cheeks looked sunken, about to rot and fall off onto his lap.

"I just don't think she ready to come home yet," Lucille said.

Montgomery sighed. "Maybe you're right, baby girl. Maybe you're right."

In a few hours, they would be back in Gibbons Park. In the morning, she and Catherine would get breakfast together and maybe play a round on the course. Maybe later that afternoon she and Montgomery would sit together in his study. She would curl up in a hard leather armchair and would listen to him talk about the midterms over a cigar. Merrimon was closing in on Dubose. The polls had him down by only three.

■

Relearning the Alphabet

It was the third weekend of the month, so Mary and David Blankman were spending Sunday morning with their mother at her three-floor colonial revival home in Gibbons Park. In order to keep her children pious, Chelsea Blankman went to each room before the clock struck six and woke them with a gentle nudge. By the time David and Mary stumbled downstairs in polo shirt and long pink skirt, a full breakfast was on the table. Scrambled eggs, smoked bacon, fresh bagels from Bestway, cream cheese, lox, heritage tomatoes. Before the frying pan lost its heat, Chelsea was prodding and hurrying the children into the car. By seven thirty they were swerving towards Hickory Grove Baptist.

David stared out the window at the rusted tangle of strip malls and apartments. He hated the drive. There was a church right down the street with a weathered stone steeple that always had a big crowd of friendly looking neighbors. They could have walked to church if they'd wanted to. Neat rows of dogwoods lined the sidewalk. He imagined the extra hours free to play with Mary in the boundless lawn behind the house. The thought carried him all the way up the steeple and into the air. But all of Chelsea's people went to Hickory Grove. They had done so since the first Dickson soul had been saved generations back. He knew better than to say anything.

"Your father is a good man," Chelsea said to David and Mary. "But he never could be bothered to drag his ass into the car on Sunday. What good's a man who can't sit up straight for an hour? Don't you think a grown man ought to be able?"

Chelsea pulled into the church parking lot fifteen minutes before the nine o' clock sermon was set to start. She grabbed both their hands and walked the three of them into the side building where the Sunday School classes were held. The first graders and the second graders were split

into different sections, so Mary and Daniel had to be separated. Chelsea signed the sheet at the receptionist's desk and then dropped the two of them off at their respective rooms, first Mary, then Daniel. With a kiss goodbye, they let go of each other's hands and Daniel made his way into Mr. Evans's room. The children sat in plastic chairs that faced the front of the room.

The Sunday School topic for the day was a parable from Matthew. Mr. Evans handed out pieces of paper with pictures of sheep and goats. He gave the children safety scissors, glue sticks, and cotton balls. They were instructed to cut out the animals and give the sheep full and fluffy cotton balls and the goats little wisps of ripped up cotton balls. Daniel started making the sheep. The round white balls made it look like a little cloud. When they were finished, Mr. Evans gathered up all of the creations. He taped the sheep to the right side of the blackboard and the goats to the left.

"When God returns to the earth, he is going to sort people into sheep and goats," Mr. Evans began. If you are good and have all your cotton balls, you get to be a sheep. But if you are bad, sin will tear up your cotton balls and turn you into a goat."

"For the Lord God is perfect. His perfection means he can't be in the presence of goats with ripped up cotton balls. But nobody is without sin. So how are we going to be like these sheep? We can't by ourselves. But Jesus died for your sins, and if you let him into your heart, he will turn all of your cotton balls white, round, and perfect."

"Here is what the scripture says about those goats. *Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire.* If you don't welcome God into your heart, when you die you end up in Hell."

David felt bad for the goats. He knew Hell was not a place you wanted to be.

"In Hell, the fire never stops. There are flames everyone you go."

One of the boys in the back raised his hand. “What if you die holding a water bottle?” he asked.

“It wouldn’t be enough,” Mr. Evans replied. “It wouldn’t be enough.”

“How about we go see a movie?”

It was the fourth weekend of the month, so Mary and David Blankman were spending Sunday with their father Jacob at his two-bedroom walkup off Kingswood. Mary and David were playing a game where they were both fairies in attendance at the court of a famous king. On their father’s suggestion, the three of them walked down the three flights of stairs to the parking lot and jumped into the car. They headed to the theater a mile away from the apartment complex that they visited every weekend.

At the ticket booth, Jacob looked through the glass at the attendant and waved. “Hello there!” he said, leaning into the circular speaker that connected through the pane. A man mumbled acknowledgment in a flat voice. The name Sherman was written on the “Attendant on Duty” board in sharpie scrawl David had to squint to read.

“I’m looking for a really terrible movie,” Jacob said. “You catch anyone storming out of the theater recently?” The man gave a little laugh and told Jacob if that was the case he couldn’t go wrong with any of the selections. “Perfect,” he said with quick look at the name board. “Thanks for the tip, Sherman.”

“Enjoy the movie,” Sherman said with a smile as he handed them tickets to an animated film about talking frogs riding a train to Reykjavik together. “Who can tell me where that’s the capital of?” Jacob asked the children. Both of them knew the answer. “I think that deserves some

snacks," he said. He bought popcorn and drinks for each child and a bag of candy for the family to share. He did this every Sunday.

They sat in a middle row together, a child on either side of Jacob. In the darkness of the theater, David imagined they were all submerged under thousands of feet of water. Then the previews began and the flashing lights of the screen were from the helmets of a thousand divers, coming to pull them out of the depths.

It would be months later on a Monday when Jacob would ask David why he hadn't invited him. David had just been baptized before the congregation. "I would have loved to have seen it," Jacob said. "I'm serious. That would have been special."

The movie had begun. On screen, the two main frogs were having tea in the dining car. A man in a three-piece suit tried to question their presence on the train, but the frogs brushed him off like it was nothing. One of them brandished his ticket. "I'm a first-class frog," he croaked. "I'm riding in luxury till the end of the line."

The next Sunday morning, the children were a bit late getting into Chelsea's car. They zipped through a yellow light and cut ahead of a driver napping in the passing lane. *New Life 91.9*, the city's number one family friendly station, played through the car. On most mornings, David, Mary, and Chelsea would all sing together. *Surrounded by Your Glory, what will my heart feel? Will I dance for you Jesus, or in awe of You be still?*

The radio was off and Chelsea was talking loud and fast. "Once you let, the Lord into your heart, he will never forsake you." David was sitting in the front seat, the belt cutting into his neck. Mary sat in the back, doing a word search her mother had bought her for a dollar fifty at a local convenience store. "I abandoned him once, in my youth, but he was there waiting for me

when I got back." She often told stories with variations on this theme. There was one involving a heroin-addicted guitarist of a heavy metal band that wrote songs about Satan who'd later found God backstage at his show. But the account of her own salvation was the one the children had heard the most. "He was waiting for me like I'd never left."

David would repeat the sentiment years later at the university, when he talked to Christian students who spread out on the quad for Bible study every Thursday. They liked him because he could recite scripture. *Romans: 10:13. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. The thing about being an agnostic with a Christian background is that you're covered either way. He will never forsake you.*

They made it to church just a few minutes late. As they jogged from the car, David glanced up at the iron cross projected out from the central tower of the main building. There were three crosses in total—two smaller ones attached on opposite sides of the structure, one that faced the parking lot and one that looked out on the grassy lawn owned by the church. The biggest cross loomed over the road, casting shadows on all the drivers who continued on without stopping. There were multiple crosses, David knew, because two people had been crucified beside Jesus.

David took his usual seat in the Sunday School classroom. For all the mornings he had spent there, he couldn't have named a single person sitting around him. There were so many other children. It seemed as though the faces switched into new ones during the weekends he wasn't there. The boys all wore T-shirts or else jerseys for whichever football team they said would be playing later that night. A few girls were wearing skirts, but many of them could have swapped their outfits with the boys without any notice. David tugged at the collar of his light

blue polo. The tag always itched the back of his neck. His mother had ripped out the tag, but the remaining fuzz still bothered him.

Today, Mr. Evans was teaching the class about the ABC's of knowing Christ.

"Admit, Believe, Confess. That's how easy it is to let Christ into your heart. Start by admitting that you need Him in your life. You need him because you are sinful. It is through grace alone that we may be saved."

"Next you have to believe that Jesus Christ is the son of God, that he is the only one who can redeem you. You have to believe with all of your heart."

"Finally, you have to confess. This part can be a bit confusing. Confessing isn't the same as saying you're guilty. For people of God, this means stating to the Lord and the world that you are a Christian. It means that you are going to follow Him and spread His Will everywhere you go."

"It's so easy to do. People do it every week. Without it, you can't join our Father up in Heaven. So why wouldn't you do it? It only takes a minute."

Mr. Evans passed around a bag full of stones and permanent markers. The children each took three. David drew the A, B, and C in extra-large capital letters on his stones before filling in the rest of the words in the neatest print he could. The second graders had just started cursive and had only made it to lowercase e.

Towards the end of his time at the university, David would stumble upon a row of Christian children's books in a shop window. He would walk in and flip through the pages and think about the devotional book his mother had read to him before bed every night as a child. It had featured a talking firefly who taught kids the values of Christ through little stories: a girl

showing love to the school bully, a boy giving the money he'd saved for a new stuffed animal to the poor family at the toy store. He had left the shop abruptly, afraid that he might start to cry.

The next Sunday when Jacob suggested they all go see a movie, David protested.

"It's Sunday. We need to go to church." Mary nodded in agreement.

"You went to church last week. Let's go see a movie. Get in the car."

Outside the sun seemed brighter than usual. It cast the parking lot in blinding oranges and yellows. The door handle to the car was hot to the touch. The three of them piled in and drove towards the theater. The car vents blasted warm air for a full five minutes before Jacob realized the air conditioning button wasn't pressed.

"What do you think we should see today?" Jacob asked. "We could do a regular or a 3D movie."

"Let's see a 3D movie!" said Mary.

"3D movies are terrible and they give you a headache after a while," said David. He pressed the radio on and turned the knob to *New Life 91.9*. Todd Agnew was singing "Grace Like Rain." His mother always remarked that he sounded like a goat. The song was the same as "Amazing Grace" but with a clean pop guitar instead of organ pipes. The singer had added in a chorus between each of the original verses to make it his signature. David liked the choruses best of all, and would have sung them if his father hadn't been in the car with him.

"What's gotten into you?" Jacob said.

"You're going to go to Hell!" David said.

"You know, the Jews are God's chosen people. It says so in the Bible."

"You don't speak any Hebrew," Mary said from the back of the car. Her first-grade class had just finished a unit on religion. "You don't even attend Shabbat." She started to cry. David started to cry too and Jacob had to pull off onto the shoulder. "You're going to Hell," they choked out between sobs. "You're going to Hell." The previews were about to begin for the noon screenings. Todd Agnew's voice lifted an octave higher as he sailed into the final chorus.

It would be more than two decades before David would think about this moment while sitting in the synagogue off Church Street. His mind would trail back to that particular Sunday afternoon and he would laugh out loud in the middle of the Shema and its Blessings. If there was a Hell, and Jacob Blankman was in it, he would be getting along nicely. He'd have won over all the other shades during the first week and would have been palling around with Belial beside the Lake of Fire by the next. David had thought about him a lot recently. If the damned were allowed some crumb of happiness, it would be in Jacob's laugh. He knew the man wouldn't be able to help it. As soon as he opened his eyes to flames, the sound would have escaped from his chest. It would echo through the halls of Pandemonium with the joyous assurance that even now there was something worth being for.

Back in the car, the air-conditioning cut out. Cars whipped past them, so close that Jacob thought they might scrape the side. He'd have to get the whole coat repainted. The clean, white polish glinted in the midday sun. David and Mary continued to scream. Jacob turned up the volume of the radio all the way up until the car pounded with bass and Todd Agnew's voice hurt their ears. *'Twas Grace that taught my heart to fear!* The music continued until the screaming stopped.

This Sunday was more important than other Sundays. Chelsea was taking Mary and David to big church for the first time. They walked out the door in brand new outfits she'd picked out for them at Ivey's. The three stones from Sunday School were propped beside the door. Chelsea had arranged them there beside a purple hydrangea bush.

On the way over to Hickory Grove, David wondered what Mr. Evans would think when he found his plastic chair empty. He asked his mother if he could stop by the room before the service, but she told him there was no time, they were already running late. David imagined what big church would be like. A room like Mr. Evans's but a thousand times bigger with a million plastic chairs. A man wearing an all-white suit who could fill the whole place with a resounding "Jesus!" He wouldn't even need a microphone.

They screeched into the parking lot five minutes past nine o' clock.

"Quick, quick!" Chelsea said, pulling her children out of the car. They sprinted through the front door of the church and into the main lobby. A church attendant cracked the wide doors to the sanctuary and they slipped inside. A member of the church was leading the congregation in a prayer for the pastor, that the Holy Spirit might fill his heart and supercharge his preaching this morning. They filed into a middle pew where a group of Dicksons was saving them seats. David recognized his grandmother's bowed head by her fluffy white curls. Beside her was his grandfather, his eyes closed. David wondered if he might be asleep. Beside them were his uncle Jonathan Dickson and his aunt Rachel, and his other uncle Matthew Dickson and his other aunt Christine. Jonah and Rachel were lost in prayer. Christine leaned over and whispered in her husband's ear every few seconds. His head was down, but he was laughing.

The sanctuary was two floors with ceilings that stretched to heaven. There were thousands of brass pipes lined against the wall at the front of the room, forming a massive organ.

Instruments were set up off to the side of a stage. There were two yellow electric guitars, a bass, a wooden acoustic, a keyboard, and a full set of drums. A giant golden cross hung suspended above the podium were the prayer was being led. Carpeted steps led up to the stage. Bibles were stacked in neat piles across the bottom step.

Then the prayer ended and the preacher was called to the podium. He looked older than the two uncles, but not by much. His dark hair was on the cusp of changing colors and his skin had just begun to crease. He was clean shaven. He wore a black suit and held a microphone.

"This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.

"When I was ten years old, my dog fell down into a creek bed. He was a small redtick hound named Jeremy, runt of the litter, and always getting into trouble. Well one day Jeremy went sniffing around the edge of the creek and he stumbled right over the edge. Now, this wasn't no shallow trickle of a creek you go splashing around in on a spring morning. This was a sharp drop off that went down eight feet, and if you were planning to go down you best have planned a way to get back up. Jeremy had no such plan. First thing he tried was clawing his way up that hill. He jumped and scratched but there wasn't any way those tiny little feet were getting him more than a couple inches off the ground. So, I jump down into the bed without thinking and soon enough we're both stuck in there together. And even though I've been drinking three glasses of milk a day, I'm still ten years old. I'm half the size of the drop. I can't climb the rope in the gym class. So, I do what any brave child would do. I start crying for help. And in seconds, my father is there at the top of the ledge. He knew a boy like me would get into trouble. And he's been nearby all along. He was just waiting for me to call.

"None of us are strong enough to climb out of our pits of sinfulness. It does not matter how good we are in this life. It does not matter how much money you put into the collection

plate or how many times you turn the other cheek. Even if we earnestly try to do the right thing every second of the day, we will fall short. Our hearts are weak and wicked. But you've got to remember something. Your Father is waiting for you too. He's waiting for you to call to Him. And once you do He'll place his arms around you and lift you up and never let you go no matter how hard you try to convince yourself otherwise that you don't need Him. That's how powerful His love is for us.

"What are you waiting for? Call out to Him. If you need help, come up to the front. One of our elders will guide you through the prayers you need. Don't wait."

While the pastor talked, musicians filtered in from the side and began to position themselves with their instruments. The keyboardist started up first, filling the room soft piano notes that floated above the congregation. David sat in his seat, his hands gripping the sides of the pew. Then he was moving towards the front of the sanctuary, towards the steps that led up the stage. A group of older men stood beside the bottommost step. David walked up to the closest one. He smiled and opened his Bible and instructed David to kneel and bow his head in prayer.

When the man spoke, it was the same letters from Sunday School. David knew the three words by heart now. He concentrated on them to make sure that they would work. *I admit that I am a sinner. I believe that Jesus Christ is my Savior. I confess my faith and will follow him forever.* Then he was walking back to his seat. The guitarist came in, improvising a few notes here and there. Then the drums began to pound, slowly, warning that the time for coming to Christ had passed and shifted into the time for worshipping Him. David made it back to the middle pew and sat between his mother and sister. Mary looked at David expectantly.

"Do you feel different?"

David turned his eyes to the praise band as they launched into a blaring song about the various names of the Lord. *Elohim. Jehovah. El Shaddai.* He was thinking about a picture from his bedtime devotional book. A group of children sat on a checkered picnic blanket in a bright green field. The little firefly was nestled amongst the leaves of a tree. Everyone was holding hands and the sun was warm on their skin and they could feel Jesus in the warmth and he was smiling down on all of them from Heaven. David closed his eyes and tried to feel it too. The music of the band reached a fever pitch and his heart began to race, thumping louder and faster as the drummer beat time to the glory of God.

■

Good Ol' Boy

I drop three pieces of bacon on the grill and crack a handful of eggs before I rush over to the waffle iron. It's a slow morning, the pay is hourly, and I pour batter like my nineteen-year-old life depends on it. Like this is the Regatta or The Game or some other such athletic contest I might watch from the sidelines while away at school in New Haven. The only people seated at the Country Boy Diner are an elderly couple, Friday regulars whose names are two orders of scrambled eggs, a side order of bacon, one chocolate chip waffle, and two black coffees. Brittany is working the morning shift and accordingly the fluorescent lights are two shades softer. The place is air-conditioned but she's brought mid-June inside and spread it to the farthest corners of the building. I flip the bacon and scramble the eggs and remove the waffle and plate everything according to the Country Boy Code: protein combos on ovals, carbohydrate dishes on ten-inch rounds. When I'm done I lean against the side of counter and watch her deliver the plates. She extends her arms over the counter and places the food directly on the couple's table with a casual grace they are too vacuous to notice. "Aegroto dum anima est, spes est. Where there's life, there's hope." Cicero said that, or at least referenced it once. Brittany turns back around and smiles at me and I am worried I am going to fall backwards onto the grill.

At the beginning of the summer I had envied Fred Thompson and Quin Edel for their financial internships down in New York City. My father had told me "Addison, you're going to get a real job because when I was your age I worked in a mill. I didn't become a physician so my children could sit around all day acting like entitled Yankees." I didn't know if the mill part was true, but I wanted to keep my school housing so I filled out an application to the Country Boy Diner, a good twenty-five miles from Gibbons Park. My father wanted me to do construction, but I got the job before he could argue.

I called Quin to complain about the awful summer I was having. “Restaurant work looks great on grad school applications,” he told me. His firm had taken them out to lunch in Manhattan. He was underage-sipping a gin and tonic from a rooftop. “I’ll probably get one just like yours before I apply to law school. My uncle works in admissions. They eat that stuff up over there.” I tried to imagine all the colorful ways I would describe the Country Boy Diner in my application materials. *A rough cross-section of true Americana. The revelation that hard work is a necessary reality. The off-white tiled walls contained an entire universe, through which I was lucky enough to spin.*

On my first day, the general manager paired me with Brittany. She had two years of experience behind the grill from when she was in high school and another six years of experience as a server after that. Her blonde curls bounced behind a hot pink hair tie as she moved from grill to grill, demonstrating the proper way to sear a hamburger steak and soft boil an egg. Her black Walmart jeans threatened to rip apart every time she bent down to grab a sheet of uncooked bacon from the fridge beneath the counter. The shape of her mouth and little bits of fat in her cheeks made me feel dizzy with the possibility they suggested. I was certain if we ever touched that the fabric of my life would be sewn into something unrecognizable, some strange and beautiful garment that would draw jealous glances from the residents of Gibbons Park.

I replace the coffee filter and wash out the now-empty pot. There have been others back at New Haven—Sonja, April, Mallory—that had filled up the loose change hours of my jobless afternoons. But Connecticut has become a desolate and freezing past readily replaced by a humid summer, a thousand chances to watch Brittany through the windows of the Country Boy Diner smoking menthols on her break as all of North Carolina falls in love with her. I fill up the new filter with fresh beans and set the machine to brew. Refilling the drinks is side work for the

servers, but I have more than enough time. A life together with Brittany is unfolding before my eyes, one in which I bring in six figures on a bad year and our house is nice, but not unreasonable, and when I get us tickets to *La Bohème* she remarks that it sounds nice and leans against my shoulder instead of launching into a diatribe about subversive aesthetics the way girls like Mallory would. Simple living. With Brittany, I am ready for simple living.

"My shift's done in an hour, Addie." Brittany's reminder throttles me in the chest. The lights preemptively dim. I'm quickly reminded of where I am: a cramped greasy box open 24-hours, plunked down on the side of the highway like an afterthought. There's a reason no one from my graduating class of Belmont High lives or even drives within a ten-mile radius of this strip-mall-scarred stretch of road. It's the worst my home state has to offer. Everyone who eats and works at the Country Boy Diner could disappear from the face of the earth today and no one would notice any difference. God help the forsaken customers who strapped on their bulging feedbags here each morning. I scrape coagulated lard from the grill top. Bacon. Bacon and eggs. Bacon and eggs with a side of grits. I run the combinations over in my mind to try and stay sharp for the remaining hour but the feeling is ruined.

The door jingles and a forty-year-old man in ripped jeans and a bulging muscle shirt walks through the door. He's got hair buzzed short and a patchy beard and eyes that immediately drag across Brittany's body, his contact breaking only when necessary to avoid tripping over himself. Brittany waves at him and he saunters over to the booth nearest her. The back of her shirt is fastened with three drawstrings that leave little circles of skin showing where they've been pulled taut. She turns to face him and I've got a full view. I stare at those circles and imagine them pressed softly against my lips. Her skin looks smoother than marble, rivalling all the handiwork of the Grecian artists of old. *Beauty is truth, truth beauty.* The man is looking

everywhere but at his menu. I watch his eyes claw their way up and down her body like he's trying to decide where to grab her first. Brittany is smiling. His arm is stretched behind him across the booth and his legs are splayed open, taking up the space of a family of three.

"Addie, can you drop two sausage patties and get me three eggs over easy?" She hands me the ticket and I move to the grill. I take my time finding the sausages. I wander over to the back of the restaurant and pretend to root around in the boxes even though I know there's a fresh stack in the fridge beneath the counter. Once I finally get around to searching the fridge I walk as slow as I can over to the grill before I drop them down. Then I open the carton of eggs. I crack each one with the caution of a child helping in the kitchen for the first time, afraid that each little knock against the pan will shatter the entire shell. I drag a three-minute process out into ten.

"Can you hurry the hell up with my food?" the man says. "It's supposed to be fast here. Didn't they train you?"

I glare down at the grill. This was why everyone in New Haven thought the South should be bulldozed. "It's coming along," I say. "Just be patient." To think I've spent even a second defending the region seems like a farce now.

The man straightens up and jabs his knife in my direction. "I was the general manager of a Country Boy Diner down in Tennessee for five years," he says. "I know how things are supposed to be done. How come that waitress knows what she's doing but you don't? You're getting your ass whupped by a girl and it ain't even close."

"I think you mean whupped by a pretty girl," says Brittany.

I flip the sausages and slide the eggs onto an oval plate. I break one of the yolks with the side of a spatula and watch the yellow run down the whites of the egg onto the plate. I slide the

patties on and thrust the plate in her direction. Brittany grabs the food and deposits it on the man's table with a stupid grin.

"Sorry for the wait," she says.

"Don't worry about it." The man has his arms pressed into the backside of the booth in a way that makes his biceps pop out of his arm more than they should. "I don't even mind this sorry excuse of an egg. I'll take a pile of slop as long as it's coming from you."

I want to tell the skinhead that he is a sorry excuse of a higher-order being, that the missing link could wipe the floor with him, that I'm going to graduate top of my class from the third-oldest university in the United States and my starting salary at whatever job I decide to take will make him want to hang himself. His hungry eyes return to Brittany and he haphazardly stabs at his plate of food. In less than an hour she will fold up her apron and walk out the door.

In an ideal world, she will get in her car and drive all the way back to her studio apartment in the Stonewood Community development that caresses the side of the highway. She will not reverse out of the parking lot and take a different route to this skin-headed former general manager's filthy home. She will take off her bright blue eyeshadow and heavy black mascara and stay in her room until it's time for bed. Then maybe I would come over and tuck her in, help her turn off the light. I stare at the clock and try not to think about how slow its hands will move after she's gone. I scrape the grill but the task feels useless. The grimy fat is part of the machinery. Underneath the primary film there is just another layer of grease.

I pull up to Jackson Bone's house around nine o' clock p.m. During my first shift at the Country Boy Diner, Jackson had told me *he* was the best damn grill cook on this side of the Mississippi, according to a survey they did of restaurants last year, and if I wanted to amount to

anything at the restaurant I should follow his teachings closely. I believe his claim to fame about as much as I believe that his last name is Bone.

But I have no interest in calling up my former Belmont peers and hearing about their adventures at whatever sixty-grand-a-year-third-tier-liberal-arts-college they'd barely matriculated. You'd think that after a lifetime of private school education the children of Belmont would be a real brain trust. Jackson Bone at least owns his IQ. There's no big hidden secret behind the boy who shotguns Pabst Blue Ribbon in his front yard and pronounces the main ingredient of Sweet N' Low as "satcharine." Belmont graduates on the other hand would impress you with perfect recitations of Shakespeare and it would be months before you'd realize they were all a bunch of Falstaffs.

I ring the doorbell and Jackson Bone greets me with an enthusiastic nod. There's a red plastic cup in his hand that I'm willing to bet is filled with Mountain Dew and well vodka. There's noise from the television filtering in from the living room—I catch the high-pitched snippets of what must be the latest-and-greatest adult cartoon (which is a great phrase, as the latter negates the very existence of the former). This is Friday night at the Bone household. In the living room, Jimmy Gowner is spread across the plaid green hint-of-mildew felt couch. Jimmy is a friend of Jackson's from grade school. Right now, he is drunk, high, or both: when he jerks his head up his face smears with a smile but no words come out. Standing in the corner of the room, shoulders hunched over, is Alec Rondall. He's one of Jackson's closest friends and a fellow employee at the Country Boy Diner, where he is in charge of scouring the crusted residue of Kraft singles from plates in the dish pit. On my first day of work, he'd noticed the car I'd pulled up in before anything else. He had a thousand questions about where in the city I lived and what high school I'd gone to and if the grass was green in my lawn growing up. I told him I was here

to work the grill not to be his best friend and hold hands and find out what his favorite color was. He'd stopped talking and that was that. We get along okay at work and I don't mind him as much anymore. I still notice his eyes narrowing whenever he looks at my Mercedes.

"I thought this was supposed to be a party," I say to the greatest grill cook east of the Mississippi as he finishes the contents of his cup. He gives me a big smile.

"Hell yeah, this is a party," Jackson Bone says. "We've got Gowner and Alec and now we've got you. We're gonna get so drunk you ain't gonna be able to so much as scramble an egg tomorrow."

"What were you expecting?" Alec says. "This isn't a damn frat house in some fancy college town." I have had a suspicion for a while that Alec was supposed to have gone to university at some point in his life and then blew the whole thing by getting terrible grades or smoking pot or else by being generally unlikable. I tell him to shut the hell up and hand me a beer, which he promptly does, snatching one from the case by his feet. He pulls a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and lights one up, in line with the "Cigs the house!" ordinance that Jackson Bone passed last month with unanimous consent. The Department of Political Science at New Haven could learn a thing or two about good governance just by watching Jackson reign over his little kingdom. He'd make a half-decent general manager of the Country Boy Diner if he'd trim the loose bearded strands from his face and learn to fold his shirts after washing them. If the skinhead who'd bothered Brittany earlier could do it, it couldn't be that out of reach.

I think for a second about driving over to see her. All employee information is stored in a file that sits in the break room. I've scanned through hers a couple of times, just because I was curious. I wanted to know exactly what color one ought to use to describe her eyes and that information is usually recorded near home address, so I just happened to see it and haven't

forgotten what I saw. I have an excellent memory. It made it easy to be the best back at Belmont, and the skill had transferred right over to the Country Boy Diner. I had the ticket shorthand for every single menu item memorized in under a week. CBBH2: Country Boy Special, side of bacon, two hash browns. SBESsG: Steak Breakfast, eggs scrambled, substitute grits for potatoes. “What did I tell you?” Jackson Bone had said. “Stick with the greatest, you become great.” Brittany’s apartment is only fifteen minutes away. I could just show up. I’ll bring over a pack of menthols and a bottle of wine from the gas station right next door to her complex and we can dream up a game plan for how to deal with her degradation at the Country Boy Diner. I’ll tell the gawking eyes to gawk where the sun doesn’t shine and she’ll spit in their food and we’ll both laugh when they threaten to tell the manager.

“How’s your shift today, Addie?” Jackson Bone asks me.

“I had a great day,” I say. “Slopping gallons of grits into the mouths of the elderly and degenerate never gets old.”

“You should try cleaning the grits off,” says Alec. “They get dried onto the plates and don’t come unstuck unless you scrape them with a steak knife.”

“Things fall apart,” I say. “Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.”

Alec’s cheeks redden. “You think it’s real easy dishwashing? I could do your stupid job in your sleep.”

I think about correcting Alec, reminding him that the phrase is “in my sleep.” But it’s more satisfying to let the error hang in the air where only I can see it. “I’m sure you could,” I say as I tilt my head back and down the contents of the can in a few gulps. “But how about you just hand me another beer instead?”

“That’s my boy!” Jackson says. “We’re gonna have ourselves a good night tonight.”

Alec tosses me another beer. On the couch, Jimmy has regained some semblance of control over his motor skills and is now sitting upright. He grabs the remote and starts flipping through the channels. He stops on a baking competition that's playing on the Food Network. There's a woman presenting a peach soufflé to an array of judges. For some reason, Alec and Jackson Bone both lock their eyes onto the screen and suddenly we are all watching "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Pie: America's Number-One Bake-Off" with rapt attention. It must be the restaurant connection in all of us because suddenly Jackson Bone is giving this woman critiques on the consistency of her crust as if he does something other than flip bacon all day. Even Jimmy gets into it, to the extent that he makes an effort to keep his head up.

"I wouldn't eat that damn soufflé if you paid me," Alec says. "Watery-looking pile of slop. Her on other hand, that's a different story."

If you buzzed the brown, weed-like tangle of hair off Alec's head, he could pass for the scrawny version of the skinhead. He looks at the woman on the screen with the same hungry eyes. It would not have mattered if the woman had received a Ph.D. in food science from New Haven.

"Man, I hope that bitch loses," says Jackson Bone. We haven't been watching for more than a couple of minutes. The woman hasn't said anything, apart from stating the ingredients in her soufflé. Everything else has been commentary from the judges. The one on the left thought her ingredient choices worked well together, but that peaches were too safe. The one in the center disagreed with Jackson and thought the crust density was perfect. The one on the right is currently mid-bite, but his face does not look altogether disappointed.

Jackson Bone, with his refined palate, was more difficult to please. "Get her off the stage. Jesus," he said. "They can't shut her up fast enough."

“She reminds me of that girl who came in when I was on break last week,” Alec said. “I wanted to ball up a bunch of napkins and shove them down her throat.”

“Was she the one that kept on talking and talking about her god damn trip to Mexico?” asks Jackson Bone.

“I think it was Peru,” I say.

“She certainly had a lot to say about it. I can’t wait to visit, wow, it’s going to be so beautiful. I mean, Jesus, we can’t all just up and go to Mexico whenever we feel like,” says Alec.

The judge on the far right thinks that the soufflé was cooked quite well, but that her plating could have been executed with more grace. She is moving on to the next round, but not with any accolades.

“I’d love to take her into the back of the kitchen and show her a thing or two,” says Jackson Bone. “Can’t deny that.”

I finish my beer and head to the kitchen, where Jackson has cases of soda stacked up beside multiple handles of the ABC store’s cheapest offerings. I fill a plastic cup about an inch and half high with vodka then pour to the lip with Coke. I wonder what Fred Thompson and Quin Edel would think if they could see me here. During our first semester at the university, we snuck into a party hosted by upperclassmen in a remodeled three-story Victorian building. A giant golden chandelier hung above the living room, which was packed wall-to-wall with the newest generation of doctors and lawyers and business executives. Malvina Reynolds would have shot herself, but I had never felt happier. I choke down a few sips of my drink and head back to the living room. There are more soufflé-bakers in need of judgment.

By my fifth drink, Alec Rondall's jokes are making me laugh and I feel I can understand Jimmy perfectly despite his total incoherence. We are talking about the Country Boy Diner, that shared universe bookended by four off-white tiled walls. Jackson Bone is going into great detail about the survey that determined his ranking as the top regional grill cook.

"You must have read somewhere that details make lies seem more real," I tell him. "How come no one else saw this interview happen?"

"Yeah, I don't remember no person coming by and asking you about your grilling," says Alec.

"That's cause you're all the way back in the dish pit, dipshit," Jackson Bone says. "Besides, he came in and acted just like a customer, only he kept watching me the whole time. Before he paid the check, he slipped me his number and we scheduled a time to do an interview at my place."

"So, I'll be able to look up this survey, right? If I research the name Jackson Bone, I'm going to see some peer-reviewed article talking about the qualitative measures used to evaluate grill cooks in the eastern United States?" I ask.

"Man, shut the fuck up," says Jackson Bone.

I flash my teeth and take a long sip from my drink. Jackson punches my arm but his face relaxes into its good-natured resting position. "Well, it doesn't matter much anyways, cause Brittany knows I'm the best grill cook around," he says.

"Did she say that?" I ask.

Jackson laughs and gets out of his seat to grab another drink from the kitchen. "Why do you care?" he calls from the other room.

"Because you're a god damn liar. I could grill you six ways till Sunday. I know that, you now that, and I'm absolutely certain Brittany knows that," I say.

"You're just mad because she looked me in the eyes and said Jackson Bone, you know your way around a grill. And you know what she said next? She said, I bet you could find your way around me pretty good too."

"Fuck you."

Jackson Bone is howling now. "Ooh I should've jumped at the chance. Now that'd be some six ways till Sundays. I've had dreams about that piece, man. I mean, she's chubby as hell but it's doing her lots of favors everywhere else, you know?"

"With her body hanging out everywhere all the time, she oughta stop pretending she's a waitress and just give us what we want. She's a god damn tease," says Alec Rondall.

I look at the two of them and all I can do is shake my head. Sitting around in a dirty apartment wearing ripped up baggy jeans and graphic T-shirts, talking about women as if their sole male role model had been a *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit magazine. It's almost enough to make me laugh.

"I didn't think people actually hated women until I met you two." I say. "Are you Neanderthals? I mean, Jesus. She's a person. Don't ever fucking talk about her like that again."

Jackson Bone stops laughing. The room is quiet except for Jimmy, who is rocking back and forth on the couch. On the television, a man is presenting a cherry cobbler to the panel.

"I seen the way you look at her," Alec Rondall says. "You can say whatever the hell you want, but I seen it."

"You don't know what you're talking about," I say. "You spend the entire day shoved in the back of the restaurant. Where you belong."

"I seen enough to know that buzz-cut man from breakfast's giving it to her good right about now. I saw how he made you look like a bitch. And she just kept on smiling and winking and bending over real far to pour his coffee. Bet you thought I didn't see, but I did."

I thrust my drink down onto the table and move towards the door. Jackson Bone yells after me but I am already unlocking my Mercedes and jumping into the driver's seat and reversing out of the driveway and yanking the car onto the main road. I can picture the man's truck parked without a permit in her parking complex. He's in her bedroom standing over her body with saliva gathering at the corners of his mouth, a stupid expression glazing across his beady eyes.

I can't wait anymore—I have to let her know she has the choice, she doesn't have to settle for every pathetic iteration of Alec Rondall and Jackson Bone that stomps through the door of the Country Boy Diner and gives her a passing glance. They disrespected her. I have to tell her I'm sorry for letting them disrespect her. She's not going to sleep with the skinhead. I don't have to worry, she's not going to sleep with him. I have to make sure. I have to check and make sure. The way he looked at her.

I'm barreling down the rightmost lane of the highway, swerving left and back again whenever a car gets in my way. I lay my hand down on the horn and keep it pressed for multiple seconds. The streetlights are bearing down on me with unbearable harshness. He might already be at her apartment. What do I do if he's there? I just need to get to her. I'll tell her what's going on and she'll kick him out for me. Sweat builds up across my forehead and in my palms so I jerk the air-conditioning dial all the way to the left, the position where the little light that sits above the degrees changes from a neutral orange to a bright blue. I didn't let them disrespect her. I told them who they really are. Brittany will pull me into her arms and I will finally taste the inside of

her mouth, burnt tobacco and mint and the unique flavor of her tissue. He's not there. They haven't started kissing yet so she will only taste like herself. I am going to beat down her door and drag him off of her.

I shoot onto the exit ramp and veer right onto her street and now I am in the Stonewood Community parking lot, I am in front of building L, I am on the second floor, I am standing outside of room six. I ball my fist and pound on the door three times in short, quick succession. Deliberate knocks. I will tear his body off of hers and throw it to the floor.

Everything becomes silent for several seconds. The sound of the highway rumbles through the thin lining of trees behind the complex. Then I hear footfall from behind the doorway, her footfall—the steps are delicate, and the door swings open. Brittany is standing barefoot in an oversized T-shirt, *Chattanooga* printed in faded orange block lettering that drapes over her breasts, pointing through the fabric though it's in the seventies tonight. Her neck is dotted with tiny spots, like a bruised piece of fruit. Her blonde hair is still tied behind the hot pink hair tie, but the curls have been straightened out and the strands are rumpled and loosely pulled back behind the elastic.

"Addison?" she asks. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I had to see you. They were saying a thousand terrible things about you. And I had to make sure, make sure about him, he hasn't done it yet has he? Where is he? Jesus, Brittany, tell me he's not inside."

"What are you talking about? Who?"

"You know exactly who. That redneck general manager from Tennessee. That skinhead. He couldn't keep his white trash eyes off of you during breakfast. Please tell me you didn't."

"I didn't," she says.

"He's not inside?" I ask.

"No," she says.

"Thank God! Oh, Brittany, I knew you wouldn't. I'm sorry I let them say anything about you. It's disgusting the way they talked about you. But I told them what they are."

Brittany just stands there. I am waiting for the moment, but perhaps she doesn't get it yet. "I did it for you," I tell her. "I did it because I adore you."

The heat outside is uncomfortable. The night has taken on a humid quality. My skin feels pricked by a thousand invisible mosquitos and I preemptively swat at my legs. "Maybe we can keep talking inside. It's pretty hot out tonight," I say.

"I'd rather not," Brittany says.

"What do you mean? Is it because I let them say things about you? Because I would never say anything like that about you. I'm not like that. I'm not like Jackson Bone and Alec and the skinhead."

"Stop calling him that."

"Why should I? You think he's gonna be marching for your rights any time soon?"

"Just stop it."

"Fine. Forget the hair. Forget all of his questionable cosmetic choices. It doesn't matter. I can tell that man's a piece of garbage just by the way he looks at you." In the parking lot, a car alarm goes off, cutting me off. It sounds for a few seconds and then stops abruptly. Brittany is looking at me the way someone might look at a grill top after a Sunday lunch rush. I can see her coming to her senses, filled with the realization of how disgusting men like him could be.

"I seen the way you stare at me," she says.

"What the hell are you talking about? I'm not the one who was sizing you up like a butcher before slaughter. Is there something wrong with just looking at you?"

Brittany doesn't respond, just stares at me for a few seconds.

"What's wrong with you? I watch your curls dance up and down when you wipe down a table. I notice the way your lips are perfectly proportioned to your nose and cheeks. That skinhead was imagining the best way to fit your breasts into his mouth."

"You might say it more beautiful. But I seen your eyes. Your mind's the same as everybody else."

Behind her I hear footsteps, heavier ones that aggressively strike the floor, resounding, testosterone-inflamed clomps. Goose-stepping towards us like the skinhead he is.

"You lied to me," I say. "I can't believe it."

From the shadows, his outline squarely fills up the doorframe. His hand snakes around Brittany's waist and his face juts out to meet mine.

"I heard loud voices. Who the hell are you?" Black hair, probably gelled back earlier into a formal part, now completely ruffled. Horned-rimmed glasses, tortoiseshell. Sharp jaw covered with the emerging prickles of a dark beard. Spotless undershirt with a little polo player knit over the right breast.

"It's fine, Warner," Brittany says. "I'll be back in a second."

"All right," the man says without breaking eye contact with me. "But call if you need me." He slides his hand off her waist, his fingertips lingering along the expansive curve. Then out of nowhere, he smiles at me and I want to lunge at his throat. But he turns and disappears back inside. The loud clomp recedes down the hall, into her bedroom.

"Who was that?" I ask.

"Warner," she says.

I don't notice the door is closed until I hear the heavy thump of the deadbolt. I pull at the handle again and again but Brittany is sealed inside. The taste of vodka rises out of my stomach and burns into my throat. The six above the door swings upside down and the night falls down from the sky and presses my body downward, a thick, humid weight. I stumble down the concrete flight of stairs into the parking lot. The way I stare at her. Warner. I'm in my car on the highway again with the windows rolled all the way down, the air can't be hot at this speed, the humidity is whipped right out of the air, cool and sharp air that stings my cheeks. Red blurs across my dashboard, the hot glow of the taillights shooting past me in the dark.

I hate the South. I hate this backwards region where skinheads and Warners and Jackson Bones walk around like God's gift to womankind. Bestride the narrow earth like a goddamn colossus. The way they stare at her. They undressed her. They pulled off every piece of her work uniform with their eyes. Warner undressed her. Glasses don't fool anyone. Anyone can go to Walmart and buy a ten-dollar pair of plastic. Everyone without wealth's the same. Same childish conception. Same idea of what it looks like to have money. Worse are the others. Ones who get a taste for the first time. The way I stare at her.

For an instant, the swirling red haze of highway is broken up. The sharp outline of a billboard. It shines a brilliant, clinical white and expands across the whole of my vision. A woman with platinum hair and ruby lips holding a plate of scrambled eggs, toast, grits, and a double order of bacon. She is wearing a flannel shirt with three buttons undone. Three-feet-long breasts lit up against the night sky. Bright orange lettering splayed beneath them. *Hungry for a Country Boy?*

The billboard rushes forward and there is the rattle of the rumble strip and the screech of tires. My body jerks forward. The windshield is a million particles of glass and I am smothered by airbags, or thrust into the breasts of the platinum woman, held there until I think I might suffocate. Then the air reenters my lungs, tears through my chest, and I throw the door open and pull myself through it onto the grass. The front of the car is split down the middle by the left pole of the billboard. Smoke billows out from under the hood. The three-pronged Mercedes circle, front-bumper, once-proud, now mangled twist of silver.

I stare up at the woman. Her eyes seem angry. Big blue pools of resentment that well up. Threaten to drown the entire highway. The way I stare at her. I stare into this woman's eyes. I am different from Jackson Bone and Alec Rondall and the skinhead, as different as anyone could possibly be. But everything is distorted. I sit down on the overheated hood. Cars belt past and I try to catch my reflection. I have every reason in the world to be different. But it is dark, the cars fast. I strain my eyes. I strain them across six lanes of highway. Long leaf pines border the road, all but disappeared in the darkness. Intangible outlines, nothing else. A suggestion of order swallowed up by the night.

■

Men of the Party

"Can you believe what happened to Claire?"

Lucas Hoxham asked the question through the fat cigar he'd managed to wedge in his mouth. Warner Ruthwood made a little face that the other immediately understood to mean *What else was supposed to happen?* Back in the day, they'd have been sent to the dean's office for so much as lighting a match on the campus grounds, but based on the way Warner leaned back into his chair, one might think his coming here to smoke was an old habit. The two men were sitting in handmade wooden rocking chairs on the main front porch at their former boarding school. The porch was attached to the admissions and central administration building, where it overlooked the entire campus grounds, from the academic halls, to the old stone chapel, to the soccer pitch, all the way down to the tennis courts. Towards the far end, one could see the opening in the forest that led to the rowing team's private lake.

"I mean, I guess we all saw it coming. I just never thought she'd go all the way. Married to Conway, of all people." said Lucas.

"There are many different paths to sainthood," said Warner.

The school was covered with yellow beeches and flowering dogwoods that had just begun their autumn wilt. The sharp outlines of the Blue Ridge Mountains stood in the background, drawing the thousands of square footages up under their protection. Any prospective student who climbed the front steps to the porch would be certain to pause for a second and take a breath before heading inside to fight for one of the few slots that remained after the old families had made their claim for the newest generation.

Warner's eyes kept returning to the cigar between his friend's lips. Lucas looked like a toddler sucking on a toy during daycare. *He never learned to do it properly,* Warner thought.

Cigars had been big back at the law school. They were a marker of every occasion—nailing your first cold call, writing onto law review, finishing your final round of exams. It was a tradition as old as the institution, back when each block of stone was backed by the tobacco fortune of its founder. *I shouldn't have brought them*. Warner had thought the cigars would be a fun way to poke fun at their school's old customs during their visit. No one would call out a Ruthwood for lighting up a cigar here. The professors, he knew, still talked about him from time to time to their new students. But now looking at Lucas, the whole idea seemed childish, something one of the troublemakers from their year might have dreamed up. Certainly, they should have been better than that.

"I almost want to go to the wedding, just to see. Any time two people under thirty conspire to do something together of that magnitude, it can't help but go wrong," said Lucas.

"Would you really be willing to drive to Kentucky just to see our beloved peers make the mistake of a lifetime?" asked Warner.

"Things might only get worse the farther away you drive from this state, but it would almost be worth it to see that meat-faced idiot stutter through his vows. But you're right. The whole thing's going to be extravagant beyond belief. It's bad enough to be bourgeois. The Conways have to go a step further and be tacky."

Nathan Conway came from an old Derby family. The buckles of all his belts were golden horses engraved with a flowing monogram. Warner had always admired the proud shape of the metal animal, its head held high, mane set off by the sunlight.

"Then I guess we're in the same boat," said Warner. "There's no way I'm going to be able to get time off work." Earlier that afternoon, the lead prosecutor had called and demanded he be back in town and at the office no later than 8:00 a.m. Saturday. If getting to assist on a

high-profile homicide trial meant the loss of every weekend till the end of time, so be it. Missing the Conways' Kentucky wedding was a price worth paying, but only because Lucas wouldn't be there. Warner imagined him stumbling around the reception area, gripping the stem of his sixth glass of champagne with his entire fist, yelling at some poor bridesmaid about the wedding-industrial complex. Add Nathan's bumbling rage into the mix and it would be sure to be an unforgettable night.

"Do you remember the time Conway almost choked to death yelling at Dr. Grundell?" Lucas asked, as if he'd been able to hear the tail-end of Warner's thoughts. Conway had managed to qualify for their advanced calculus class during their junior year, though nobody knew how. Three days into the semester, he went up to the whiteboard to try and solve a problem, and after three minutes of illegible scribbling he started screaming at the professor that the whole class was rigged against him. His face got redder and his throat tightened and without warning he was choking. He never stopped yelling.

"I remember that. My favorite part was when he fell to his knees and just sat there wheezing. Everyone thought he was gonna pass out but then he raised his head up, looked Grundell dead in the face and said, 'You don't need differential equations when you own the god damn Derby.'"

Lucas shook his head. "Nobody should have that much money. Conway is living proof that being a millionaire and being a good person are completely incompatible."

"Claire's not so bad," Warner said. Conway aside, her family had stake in one of the largest department stores in the upper South. But Claire had seemed so normal that most assumed she was there on scholarship. The only reason anybody ever found out the truth was because Conway had made a big deal about it after visiting her family over one of the breaks.

After the trip, she started wearing all her belts with a silver horse buckle. As with horses, breed determined everything. But even after eight years of Conway, Claire was still Claire. Warner had always liked her.

"Claire's great. My favorite part about her is the family business built on sweatshop labor. I think it's just fantastic how she profits off the dust-choked lungs of children. Oh, that and her winning smile!"

Warner wanted to ask Lucas where he bought his shirt, but thought better of it. His own button-down had in fact been purchased directly from one of Claire's stores. Warner liked the feeling of wearing clothing produced by a friend. He felt an immensity of pride in the knowing. The people in his world meant something.

"You know, sweatshops serve an important role," Warner said. "They provide a source of income to a population that would otherwise be extremely impoverished. And it's pretty much impossible for a country to industrialize without first going through an intermediary development phase. That was the U.S. once too." Back when he was studying economics at Eastover, one of his professors had spent two weeks on the topic of international labor markets. The class and the instructor were bone dry, but some of the concepts had been interesting enough to commit to memory.

"Jesus, Warner," said Lucas, exhaling a giant cloud of smoke. "Are you seriously defending sweatshop labor right now? I know you're still in love with Claire, but that seems like a bit far, even for you."

Warner considered whether he would voluntarily subject children to unsafe working conditions if it meant Claire's marriage with Conway would fall apart. Probably not, though the temptation was admittedly there.

“Besides Casanova, you’re assuming I want the rest of the world to industrialize,” Lucas continued. “I thought you might have learned something about false premises back in law school. Being more like the U.S. isn’t an achievement. It’s a thousand steps in the wrong direction.”

Warner nodded and raised the cigar to his lips. Back at Eastover, he’d made the acquaintance of a group of individuals identified as either anarchist, communist, or anarcho-communists. They would all meet in the lobby of the Grovewood Hotel to sit in the large leather armchairs by the fireplace and discuss political theory over cocktails. He’d had some version of this conversation with them hundreds of times.

“Do you remember that time we snuck four handles of whiskey into the dorms using empty shampoo bottles?” Warner asked.

“If I recall, that was my stroke of brilliance. There’s nothing quite like sipping Old Fitzgerald out of a bottle of L'Oréal Scalp Relief.”

“I think it enhanced the fruity notes.”

Lucas laughed, a high-pitched string of hysteric notes that resolved into a smile. Warner remembered exactly why he loved him so much. There had been a time when every conversation went just like this. The entire world could be summed up in a series of one-liners about the school and its inhabitants, and it was incredibly important to both men that they speak those lines whenever they could. Warner had always loved the sound of laughter and Lucas was never withholding with his.

“Is that Warner Ruthwood?” came a voice from behind the rocking chairs. The two men turned in their chairs. “I hope those aren’t cigars I see.”

“Don’t worry, they’re just props,” Warner said. “It’s great to see you, Mr. Achords.”

"You too. And Lucas. What a nice surprise. What brings you two back? You're just a couple years shy of the ten-year class reunion."

"I was in the area," Warner said. "And I can't really count on reunions after Lucas missed the first one."

"Too many assholes in suits," Lucas said.

Mr. Achords scrunched up his mouth into what could have been a smile. He was wearing a deep green three-piece suit with white pinstripes, ever faithful to their school's colors. His tie featured diagonal rows of their coat of arms—a beehive, a cross, and a row of wheat. He had been a student here forty years ago. He now worked in admissions.

"I hear you passed the bar on your first try, Warner," said Mr. Achords.

"Yes sir. I'm glad to be done with it."

"And how's working with your brother down in the district attorney's office? Is he still as bullheaded as I remember?"

"He's probably worse," Warner said with a smile. "Part of me hopes he'll lose the election just so I don't have to have him as my boss."

"Well, I'm sure neither of you will be there for too long anyways. I've seen enough Ruthwoods graduate from this school to know you folks don't settle for small."

"Family tradition," Warner said. "There's much to live up to."

"Indeed. And Lucas, you're still in the area correct?"

"Yep." He kept the cigar in his mouth as he spoke.

"And where's Elizabeth these days?" Mr. Achords asked.

"She works for the Fed."

"That's impressive." said Mr. Achords.

"Yes, she's doing the Lord's work."

Mr. Achords frowned and smoothed out the front of his suit. "Well, it was great running into you both. Warner, best of luck to your brother. If I lived in your county, he'd have my vote."

"Thank you, Mr. Achords. I'll be sure to let him know we saw you," Warner said.

Lucas waited until he was back inside before saying anything.

"That man has become even more of a joke since the last time I saw him. Imagine wearing clothes with your old boarding school's coat of arms."

Warner liked Mr. Achords, his three-piece suit, and the ideals of scholarship that the beehive, cross, and wheat on his tie represented. He had one just like it in his closet that he'd worn to the last reunion paired elegantly with his favorite French cuffs. Always worn with silver poplar cufflinks, so that even the hired staff who didn't know his name would know he was a Ruthwood.

"What's so bad about admissions staff wearing school-inspired clothing? Would you have preferred a hoodie?"

"It's classist, Warner. After work when he saunters over the grocery store across town, because he didn't buy enough at the farmer's market on Sunday and now he has to slum it, he's going to stroll down the aisles, wearing that gaudy thing. Maybe he picks up a delicious Bordeaux, plops it right down in the car next to the terrine, because he's making a charcuterie board tonight. And then all the working mothers who just picked up their children from a mind-numbing session at the local public school are going to see that tie with its goddamn beehives. And how do you think that's going to make them feel?"

Warner tried to picture Mr. Achords strutting through the aisles of the local supermarket chain, looking down at single-mother while throwing low-carb muesli into his shopping cart,

muttering under his breath about how third-rate the selections were compared to those at Bestway.

"You know Mr. Achords came here on scholarship back in the day? It's not like he's a Conway."

"Then he's even more pathetic. Forty years later and still kissing up to the ruling class as if one day they're finally going to feel bad and throw him some scraps. He's still complicit, Warner. Everyone who's a part of this school is."

Beside the chapel, a group of girls were walking past with textbooks under each arm. One of them wore a thin pink dress, which Warner thought might be chiffon. It was getting too late into autumn to be wearing something like that. The girl reminded him of Claire. She had always worn summer clothes all the way up until the first day of winter. She could have walked into one of her department stores and picked up a new outfit every day. But it was always the same, well-loved linen dresses and laundry-machine-worn blouses, no more than a handful of each. Warner wondered if Conway had changed that about her by now.

"Why are you staring at those girls?" Lucas asked. "For Christ sakes Warner, you're gonna end up prosecuting yourself if you keep up like that."

"When did you say the wedding was? Next weekend?"

"It's tomorrow evening! I'm driving up first thing in the morning. Are you in after all?"

"I'm actually working on a really important case right now. I just don't know."

"Come on, I'm sure someone else can throw the poor and oppressed classes in prison while you're gone. Or is the magic lost for you if you're not there to look them in the eyes?"

A single scene was playing in Warner's mind, one in which Claire unclasped the golden horse around Conway's suit trousers and sank down into his king-sized mattress. A Ruthwood

was about to be in charge of the entire district. He could afford to miss one day of work. He'd swing by one of Claire's department stores tonight before they closed to buy a new suit. He'd call the DA's office in the morning so they wouldn't have a chance to argue.

"It'd be wrong to miss such a momentous occasion," Warner said, taking a long pull. "You only get married once."

Warner had to drive for hours before the strips of farmland gave way into the Conway estate. The switch between them was at first only apparent by the quilts that marked the side of the black-painted barns. Each property had its own pattern of geometric lines. Then, when his car was about thirty minutes from the destination, the quilts began to repeat themselves, sharp triangles in black and gold packed into the form of a star. These barns were much bigger, their coats a fresher shade of black. He'd expected to see horses roaming along the Conways' property, violently galloping across the grassland. But that would have made about as much sense as a collector parking her vintage convertibles in the backyard by the grill. Warner felt stupid for ever having entertained such a fanciful image. Perhaps Claire had imagined something similar back in high school, the first time she'd come down to visit over the breaks. Had she been disappointed too?

In the distance, Warner was able to make out the strong outlines of the venue the Conways had constructed for the wedding. If hearsay was to be believed, he had drawn up the blueprints and hired contractors a full year before he'd asked Claire to marry him. As he got closer, he was able to make out the details. It was a huge wooden structure that resembled something of a modernist barn, with an open-air base and three layers of dark mahogany and floor-to-ceiling panes of glass. Rather than a traditionally rectangular shape, the building looked

as though it had been bent in the center and then forced to extend outward on either side for much longer than was needed. The support beams on each level jutted out from the walls with architectural flair. The roof of the barn opened up like an unwrapped box into a private patio that overlooked acres of fallow Conway land.

It was just around noon, hours before the ceremony was set to start, but a patch of grass beside the venue was already lined with vehicles in Mercedes, Land Rover alternation. Warner tossed his keys to the valet so the man could continue the pattern. Lucas pulled into the lot right behind him. They'd left the city around the same time so they could arrive together. Warner had called Claire the night before to inform them of their unannounced arrival. She'd sounded pleased and told them to come early for the pre-ceremonies. "A lot of people from school will be there," she said. "It'll be just like the last reunion, but even more fun." As Lucas got out of the car, Warner couldn't help but wonder if arriving with him had been a mistake, just like the cigars.

"Would you take a look at the awful thing," Lucas yelled to Warner before he'd even gotten halfway out of his car. "Frank Lloyd Wright would string himself up a flagpole."

"I mean, do I even call it a barn, or should I just cut to the chase and call it a mistake," he continued once he rejoined Warner. "How much minimum wage labor do you think it took to build that affront?"

"I have no idea, Lucas," said Warner. Just the other week, the Southern Economic Association had published a report on unemployment levels in Kentucky. "The lack of employment opportunity in the region," the report had stated, "is matched only by the levels of privation faced by those in the communities outlying main metropolitan areas." Not that the Carolinas were doing much better. He wondered if Merrimon would be able to implement his

plans for Southern growth once he was re-elected to the Senate. When Warner ended up running for office, he was going to be certain to include that in his platform.

"Let's start placing bets on Conway. What type of outburst do you think he's going to have and… how long do you think it's going to take? Oh, and what do you think will set it off?" Lucas asked.

"Smashing the wedding cake, twenty minutes into the reception, mid-way through a particularly spot-on toast," Warner said.

"I hope he gets all choked up again. It's the best when he gets bright red. I always get my hopes up that he'll stop breathing altogether."

Warner tried to laugh. Lucas wasn't smiling at all. His expression of disgust had not changed since he'd gotten out of the car. Despite his tuxedo, he looked to Warner more like a member of the wait staff than an invited guest. The Hoxhams may not have had a name like Ruthwood, but they had been just as capable of sending their son off to school to receive the best education the South had to offer. The suit hung limply off Lucas' shoulders, as though the fabric couldn't believe in him either. Still, Warner couldn't ignore those electric blue eyes, or his smoothed-back blonde hair. Lucas was beautiful enough to be there in his own right. And since so many people in attendance knew his background, it didn't much matter how well he looked the part. He could afford the same suits everyone else could.

"Shall we see what dear Conway has in store for us?" Lucas asked, before bounding ahead of Warner towards the first level of the barn. Quite a crowd was gathered. Warner recognized faces immediately as members of their high school graduating classes. Once he'd caught up with Lucas, he realized that at least half of the party currently in attendance had been

former classmates. Everyone had drinks and the men all smoked cigars. Neither Claire nor Conway were anywhere to be seen.

"You know, this is pretty toned down," said Warner. "I was expecting one of those old-style plantation mansions with Corinthian columns. And a parade of dancing women and elephants marching down the front steps to trumpets."

"He might still have those hidden," said Lucas. "And just because the damn thing is minimalist doesn't mean it isn't outrageous. Conway built four-stories in the middle of a field just for a wedding. Who does that?"

Warner told him he agreed, that this was not something people did. But the barn didn't seem that bad.

"How about we get ourselves a drink?" Warner asked. "No sense in facing down both classmates and a wedding sober."

"Jesus, Warner. It's barely noon," Lucas said. But he followed Warner over to the bar that stood by the entrance. It was several feet long but housed by a single bartender, who wore suspenders and a bowtie in the pattern of the barn quilts Warner had seen on the last leg of the drive. The shelves were lined with bourbon and nothing else. A particular emphasis had been placed on Blanton's, presumably for the horse iconography on the cork. A closer look revealed the name *Conway* spread across all of their labels. *Special Wedding Edition.* The famous horse corks had little C's engraved into their sides.

"Care for a mint julep, sir?" asked the bartender.

"Are there any other options?" asked Lucas.

"I'm afraid not. Mr. Conway was quite particular about that."

"We'll both have one," said Warner. The bartender nodded and uncorked one of the signature bottles. "Special batch," the man said. "Never be another chance to try it after today." He handed them the drinks with a flourish. Warner slipped the man a ten-dollar tip. He brought the drink up to his lips and took a drawn-out sip. He wondered if he'd ever taste bourbon this good again. Even if he rose up the ranks U.S. attorney, then senator, then governor, even with all of the money of the Ruthwood estate, he still might never have enough to convince Buffalo Trace to distill a batch of whiskey just for him. Warner thought he could feel the alcohol run straight to his head, and he was happy to have skipped breakfast.

"Warner! Warner, is that you?" From across the room, he recognized the flushed faces of Julie Etheridge and Knox Martin. Back in high school, they had all been in the theatrical arts club together, and had competed for the starring roles each time a new play was announced. In the spirit of high school drama, they had competed for each other as well, each coming up successful at one point or another across the many productions their school put on. Warner remembered scaling the ladder up to the catwalk with Julie after rehearsals for *Death of a Salesman*. "Pay attention to me," she had said, over and over again whenever his focus shifted somewhere else during the long hours spent waiting in the wings to go on. He always did.

Julie had gone on to Broadway to star in the first run of an up and coming play that one critic had described as "acutely ridden with malaise, brilliantly disaffected." This was, he was told, a compliment. Knox had made it into the production too, as a supporting role. Warner found it fitting. That he'd ever managed to make it into Julie's life was just as much a stroke of accident, just as undeserved. The only reason he was able to act at all was thanks to the immense practice he got during his day to day. On some level at least, Julie must have found the performance convincing. But Warner was too smart for that. That's why he'd be governor. And

Knox would remain a back-up vocalist in the ensemble, understudy for the role of a life well lived.

"I've missed you so much!" Julie practically jumped into Warner. She wrapped her arms tightly around his entire body, then slipped them around his waist to pull him in closer.

"Warner, my boy! It's been too long," said Knox, thrusting his hand out in between the two of them. Warner waited a few seconds, then broke from Julie to shake his hand.

"I've got so much to tell you about, Warner. So much has happened. Life is moving so fast. And Lucas! Hello! I didn't know you'd be here. How have you been?" Julie asked, perhaps noticing that he was there for the first time. Knox gave a little wave in his direction.

"I've been doing well. How's Broadway? Improved a lot of lives through your art?" Lucas asked.

"It's been a dream and a blur. I don't know if I've ever been happier. And I like to think the people who have seen the show left a little happier too," Julie said.

"It can't be easy having enough to spend on ten thousand dollar tickets. Those people needed the pick-me-up," Lucas said. "It's charitable, frankly."

"This is why you never got a call-back, Lucas," said Knox.

Julie squeezed Knox's arm and gave him a little smile. Warner tried not to pay the gesture any mind. It didn't matter if the two were sleeping with each other again. He was certain that he had raised the bar above anyone who had come before, and that he had left it higher than anyone could ever hope to reach again. Insecurity was for people who weren't good enough. After all, Knox was a fine companion. Perhaps he would get a lead role in his next Broadway musical. There was, to be sure, plenty to admire about him.

"Do y'all remember that dress rehearsal for *Much Ado About Nothing*, when the director got furious at Knox for still using his script for the final scene?" Warner asked.

"Oh my God," said Julie. "When he leapt onto the stage and tried to rip the script in half, I thought he'd lost his mind. And then Knox tried to grab his clipboard and rip up all of his notes!"

"I honestly can't believe I didn't get kicked off that show right then and there," said Knox.

"It was too late into the production," said Warner. "Even the smallest roles in that play would have taken at least a couple weeks to learn. How would we have replaced you?"

"If you know your worth to someone, you can afford to act out a little bit," said Knox. "Those were good times. I miss doing productions with you."

"I miss it too," Warner said, and meant it. Knox was a fine actor. They'd had a lot of fun together. He'd have to get tickets to see them performing if he ever found the time to get up to New York. Maybe he'd take the trip up with Lucas. There'd be some complaints about the inherent selfishness of being an artist when the world is filled with suffering and inequality, and even more complaints about the suits and the champagne of the box seats Julie would inevitably secure for them. But maybe afterwards they would all grab dinner someplace cheap, maybe one of those twenty-four-hour joints like the Country Boy Diner. There had been one across the street from their old school that all the students walked to on the off days when they had free time and permission to leave campus. Warner had spent hours across the booth from Lucas, their ties loosened, the top button of their pressed Oxford shirts undone. All they ever did was laugh.

There was a shout of "Julie" from across the room. One of their former classmates was waving her over.

"I guess that's my cue," said Julie. She rested her hand lightly on Warner's shoulder. The full weight of her body transferred through the touch, as if she were bearing down on him with force. "It was great seeing you Warner. "I hope I can catch you again before you leave."

With that she was off. Warner watched her disappear into her crowd with the presence of an actress. When she exited stage right, the audience noticed. Knox followed close behind.

"Well they haven't changed a bit," said Lucas. "Leading the glittering, shallow lives of New York artistocrats we always knew they would."

"Quite the assessment."

"Well I'm sorry Warner, but creating art is not enough."

"Do you think art has the power to change people's minds? Or change society?"

"No, I don't. It's all working within the same system. The actors are making millions of dollars to put on performances for millionaires. How radical do you really think that art is going to be? The rich don't want to see anything that disrupts their worldview."

"Maybe they just don't want to see anarchist Hamlet."

"Or maybe the liberal media suppresses actual discourse. Come on Warner, I'm trying to be serious here."

Warner shrugged and downed the rest of his mint julep. He gave a nod over to the bartender, who began pouring him another immediately. Lucas had made an absolute fool of himself again. Perhaps Julie would have invited them to follow her if he'd kept his mouth shut. The bartender handed him his drink. She had still wanted to see him. He took a long sip.

Lingering drops of bourbon still burned on his lips when he turned around and saw her standing by the bar. Soon-to-be Claire Conway was smiling right at him. No wedding gown yet, instead a fitted white dress with sharp outlines. She wore a thick black belt clasped with a golden

horse high around the waist. She looked every bit the future leader of Southern industry that everyone now knew she was. It was as if today was her coronation and not her wedding. It occurred to Warner that perhaps the Blanton's had been her idea.

"Warner. I'm so glad you could make it," Claire said. She took his hand into hers and held it there. She smiled at Lucas. "It's great to see you both."

"Thanks for accommodating us so last minute."

"We made it through boarding school together. Those bonds at the very least necessitate a spot at each other's respective weddings. We've got to look out for each other."

"We're all tied together through our parents' wealth," Lucas said. "An unbreakable bond."

"That's pretty funny, Lucas," said Claire. "How's your parents' wealth been treating you these days?"

"I try not to make it a habit to live off ill-gotten money," said Lucas.

"That's very noble of you," said Claire.

Warner choked back a snort. His head was wonderfully light. Claire was even better than he'd remembered. All around him rang the voices from their past. If he closed his eyes, he could have been back at Fall Formal. The crisp breeze of mountain air licked at his ears and tossed around his thick, black curls. He had a strong feeling in the tips of his feet to start dancing.

"Claire, where the hell have you been, you gorgeous wonder?" A man in a white tailored suit threaded his arm around her waist and kissed the top of her head. "Keeping these rabble-rousers in line, I presume?" He gave Warner a wink.

"Nathan, my love. I'm glad you found me," she said, leaning up to kiss him deeply.

"Oh my God, is that Conway?" Lucas asked.

Upon hearing the question, the man who was Nathan Conway somehow stood up even taller, pressing his shoulders back and his chest out. He had become as powerful as his race horses, a bundle of pulsing muscle behind a sturdy frame. The wiry tufts of beard he'd been forced to shave back in school now formed a well-trimmed, jet black thicket.

"Lucas, great to see you. You haven't changed a bit. And of course, Warner. Who could forget a Ruthwood? Thanks for fitting us into your busy schedule," said Conway. "I've got something to show you boys," he said before anyone could reply. He fished two cigars out of the pocket of his suit jacket. "You can't go without one of these," he said, handing one each to Warner and Lucas. "And four more mint juleps, barkeep, we've got ourselves some thirsty company."

"Come with me," Conway said after they had grabbed the drinks. He and Claire led the two of them to a wooden staircase off to the side of the room. They ascended three flights. At the top of the final one there was a door with a lock pad. Conway punched in an eight-digit code and pulled open the door.

"This is our private balcony. Two years ago, when I was drawing up the plans for this place, it occurred to me that despite the stated goals of the entire affair, one thing that's often absent from a wedding entirely is intimacy. You've got hundreds of friends and family members all crowding around you at all hours, and the only time you get alone comes once you've made it to the marital suite. This is my solution. Personal access only, three-sixty view of Conway land."

"And it's so much more tasteful than a cordoned-off room labeled VIP," Claire said.

Warner nodded. "It's brilliant." The concept made perfect sense. But it was unclear why Conway had invited him and Lucas up into such a personal space. The two of them must have spent a third of their waking hours at boarding school coming up with different ways to mock the

former oaf. They never said anything to him directly, so perhaps he hadn't heard, though Warner knew that practically nothing had stayed secret amongst his classmates while they were in school. Or maybe he knew about Claire. Warner kept a steady stream of julep pouring down his throat. In the worst of scenarios, he could prosecute Conway into oblivion from a hospital bed. But perhaps the man just wanted to show off to some of the people from his adolescence. Everything else aside, Warner had always been a good friend of Claire's. He had every right to be on that rooftop. And Lucas had a right to be there by association.

"Let's get those cigars lit, shall we, boys?" Conway asked, light already in hand. He lit his own, then handed the lighter to his wife, along with another cigar he had slipped out of his suit jacket. The tips were pre-cut, presumably for the convenience of smoking them as soon as Conway deigned to present them to a person.

"How many of those you got stashed away in there, Conway?" Lucas asked.

"Enough to have us all thrown into a U.S. customs holding cell for the rest of our days. I hate to say it, but I'm in favor of keeping that embargo going forever if it means these don't flood the market. They wouldn't be as good if every fool with a nicotine addiction had one wedged in their mouth." Conway took a long drag and waved the cigar around in front of Warner. "Don't go throwing me behind bars for this now. I can't have my wife visiting me from prison this early into the marriage."

"You're not in my district," Warner said. "Unfortunately, there's nothing I can do."

"There's my boy. I was worried for a second your old prefect ways were going to come out. Claire thought you might try to give us both demerits."

"Well, your suit is perfectly in dress code. The handbook doesn't say anything about color."

"It's great that you still remember little things like that, Warner. It's like you never graduated."

Warner looked at Claire. Her body rested against Conway's, yet stood firm in its own right. He was certain that if he reached out to touch them their skin would hum with energy, in the way of those electric generators he had pressed his hand against as a young child, when he'd stumbled upon their massive green forms behind the school building with wonderful fear.

"They're Cuban then?" Warner managed to say. "The cigars?"

"Unless the good people of Brunei suddenly became renowned for their tobacco-rolling," Conway said.

"You know," Lucas interrupted. "We could learn a lot more than just tobacco-rolling from Cuba. They're light years ahead of the United States as a country."

"Is that so?" Conway asked. "Did Cuba become a world power while my back was turned? Did they just created a handful of new wonder drugs I haven't found out about yet? I guess I need to start reading the news, because it feels like I'm missing something."

"All of their citizens have access to healthcare. They don't leave kids with leukemia out on the streets to die."

"But what you're forgetting, my boy, is that we came up with the treatment for leukemia. Those U.S. pharmaceutical companies you hate so much invented chemotherapy.

"You're also holding that cigar all wrong," Conway said. "Thumb and index. Not index and middle. If you want to be a radical so bad, the least you can do is learn to smoke properly."

"Here's to the happy couple," Warner said, raising his glass. "Who needs politics on a day like today?" He felt unsteady on his feet.

"I thought you wanted to be a politician, Warner," Claire said.

"Where'd you hear that from?"

"There's nothing to be embarrassed about. We all have dreams," she said.

"What's your dream?" Warner asked.

"I'm going to own all of Kentucky with this man by my side."

Warner could not believe that man was really there in front of him. The red-faced impotence of Conway's youth was completely absented from this new figure. Warner had never conceived of a world in which he might have to tilt his head downward in deference to the boy who had once ripped up his English midterm five minutes into the exam period, who had struggled to string together a coherent thought beyond his family's fortune, whose name had been at turns synonymous with celibacy and incapacity and provincial backwardness. Warner looked at Lucas. He looked ready to jump out at Conway and claw him to the ground. Lucas didn't stand a chance, and part of Warner hoped he'd throw a punch.

"It's wild seeing everyone back together again," Claire said. "I don't want to be sentimental, but life really does feel like it's flying by. It hasn't even been a decade since high school. And everyone here is so happy, and so different. I never thought we'd graduate, deep down."

"We'll always be boarders, in some capacity," said Warner.

"Jesus Christ," said Lucas.

"You know, I think that's the first thing you've said I can agree with Lucas," said Conway. "What was the point in being the most impressive sixteen-year-olds in the South? Maybe you can enlighten me, because I never understood."

"It wasn't about that," Warner said, but he was not sure why not, or what any of it had been about in the first place. All he knew was that the memories felt warm. The rooftop by

contrast was far too windy for any reasonable person to enjoy. Warner felt a chill run through his entire body. It wasn't bracing like the mountain air, in that way that he had savored on long walks over the campus grounds, green and white striped cashmere scarf wrapped around his neck. He'd used to remark on such days that the cold was the perfect reminder that he was alive, which he realized now was a strange thing for a sixteen-year-old to say. The land was too flat in this field. There was nothing to break up the gusts as they gained in speed.

"Warner, the only good thing that will ever come out of that school will be if it burns to the ground and takes a generation of the South's worst offerings down with it," Lucas said. "Julie, Knox, and I hate to say it, even your precious Claire all end up the same."

"Lucas, if you're going to be on this rooftop, you're going to respect me," Claire said. She was still smiling and puffing away on her cigar.

"My apologies! I forgot who I was speaking to. Claire, the land-owner! Claire, the queen of dime-a-dozen throwaway retail! Allow me to raise a glass to this incredible woman. A woman who dared to inherit. When you're done, maybe you can own North Carolina too. Won't that be nice, a woman owning everything for a change," Lucas said.

"I'm going to pitch you off the side of this railing if you don't stop talking," Claire said.

"And I'm going to be waiting for you on the ground floor," Conway said.

"I'm sorry if the truth hurts. But the reality is that while you sit around drinking mint juleps, the poor in this country are slaving away working four, five jobs just to make rent. And while you live off of your ill-gotten generational wealth, your lovely wife sits around plotting where to build her next overseas factory, that she will stuff to the brim with Indonesian child labor. But thank God for both of you, because she's stimulating the economy, and now we can

all buy cute little knit sweaters for less than twenty dollars at the strip-mall retail chain your father gave you. Where's your sense of morality?"

"Lucas, that was quite a speech. They're going to love you in the DPRK," said Conway.

"You know what, I'd be happy to live there. There've been so many people who've left the DPRK for South Korea. Once they get a taste of what it's like to have to work just to survive, they realize it wasn't so bad over there after all. But you're never going to read about that in any of the bought and paid for news outlets because their billionaire owners don't want you to know it.

"And before you even start with me about how poor the conditions are over there, "Lucas continued, "maybe you should reconsider what we put on a pedestal in this country. Economists will tell you about quality of life. But what does that even mean? We have air-conditioning and nice houses, at least some people do. But we also have more homeless people than any other developed country in the world. And what about all the people in developing countries that have to suffer so we can have our quality of life. It's nothing short of the highest order of privilege to keep ignoring these things because you're comfortable."

"Well, I can't think of a higher order of privilege than a trust-funded suburbanite arguing that quality of life doesn't matter when you continue to enjoy it and have never experienced living anywhere else. It's pretty easy to be a fan of the third world when you don't have to be there," Claire said.

"God, you two are still the worst," Conway said. "Claire thought you might've gotten better, but I knew it would still be the same**."**

"I'm talking to you too, Warner," he continued. "You've been pretty silent for a big shot prosecutor. What happened to the captain of the debate team? Why don't you man up and state your mind?"

"What's there to say?" Warner said. "I don't have an opinion."

"This is why Claire's never going to want to be with you," Conway said. He seemed about to laugh, but his fists were clenched. "Do you think I'm an idiot? You know what, Warner, if you had looked her in the eyes when you'd first shown up and told her how desperately you've always wanted her, I'd at least have some respect for you. But instead you skulked around our barn, drinking our drinks and talking about me under your breath. So how about you tell everyone what you really think about all this. Or are you as scared of Lucas as you are of me?"

Warner couldn't look at Claire, or anyone. It was done. Lucas laughed. "I'll save you both the trouble. Warner believes that the world would be a good place if only honest politicians with prestigious law degrees had more power. The machine has been stalled for a hundred years, and he still thinks working through the system is possible. Who cares if change takes decades? The Ruthwoods are comfortable enough to wait."

"Well, what have you done?" Claire asked.

"I'm out in the streets of the city working with local organizers. We're protesting every other day of the week. When I get home, I read pages of theory until it's light outside, and then I start the whole process over again. You all don't get it. We have to elevate the class consciousness of every worker in this country. Only when these men and women rise up together to demand better conditions for themselves and their fellow workers will there be any real change. We need a country led by the people of the party, not another generation of Ruthwoods and Conways and Merrimons."

"Waiting around for revolution sounds even less practical than waiting for systemic change. People are going to suffer much more in the meantime." Claire said. "Getting bogged down in pages of radical academic theory doesn't help actual workers. Your local garbage man doesn't care how much Marx you've read, because he has an actual job and he knows people like you aren't going to help him out.

"Tell me how much change has resulted from the clever picket signs you carry around," she continued. "Point to a single damn thing that's changed because of you and I'll shut my mouth. Because I really don't think you can. All of this, it's no different from dressing up in a costume and gazing at yourself the mirror. I'll be damned if I'm going to sit here on my wedding day and receive a lecture from somebody like that." Though Claire was several inches shorter than Lucas, she had seemingly risen up to his height, perhaps even higher. Realizing the conversation was over, Lucas threw his cigar to the ground. Warner looked to Claire. She had disregarded the action, choosing instead to slip her hand around her soon-to-be-husband's.

Warner understood then why she and Conway had chosen to stand together, and regarded with jealously her capacity to know both herself and her place in the world with such sureness. Coming here had been a mistake, just like the cigars, and it was so cold up on the rooftop. Not at all like the mountain air. Warner wrapped his hands tightly around his chest. He missed Lucas and wanted Claire, just as he knew they were both already gone.

■

Life Lesson #54

The boy walked behind the man down the sand-speckled road. The boy's mother moved alongside the man, holding his hand. The asphalt was so hot it melted in places and the boy had to step quickly as he had left his shoes back at the house the man had rented for the week. The mother wore a brand-new bikini lined with turquoise beads that the man had bought and placed on her pillow with the tags still attached and facing up. The man wore red swim trunks and a black swim shirt, the same shirt that he wore when he lounged poolside back at his home in the Stonewood Community development apartments.

"Carry this, your mother's back hurts," said the man, handing the stuffed beach bag he had been holding to the boy. He took the bag with the hand he was not using to carry the three beach chairs. "You're our pack mule," the man said with a laugh. He rolled a plastic cooler behind him, and the wheels rattled against the road.

They walked up the uneven slopes of the boardwalk and onto the sand, plodding towards the closest empty umbrella. The man threw down the cooler.

"Could you set up the chairs?" he asked.

"These umbrellas have to be rented," said the mother. She pulled her wallet from the beach bag and took out her credit card.

"I've got it, babe," said the man. He fished a crumple of bills out from the side of the bag. "Let's go," he said to the boy before jogging towards the stand marked *Rentals.* As he paid for the umbrella, he turned to the boy. "Got another life lesson for you, son. Number eighteen. Provide for your woman. Girls like it when a man is able to give them things. It turns them excited, if you get what I'm saying."

The boy nodded. He was thinking about his mother's home back in Gibbon's Park, the largest white house on the street.

"You're writing these down, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Are you using the book I got you?"

"Yes."

"That book wasn't cheap."

"I know."

"Let's get back to your mother."

The boy unfolded the three beach chairs and sat down in the one farthest to the right. His mother was already face down on a towel in the sun in front of the umbrella. The man sat down in the middle seat.

"Why don't you go play in the waves?" he asked. The boy stayed in his chair.

"There's sunscreen in the bag," said the man.

"What SPF?"

"Thirty-five."

"Mom makes me use at least fifty."

"They didn't have that at the store."

"You can use any kind you want, honey," called the mother from her towel. The boy didn't move.

"Is it too late to get a refund on that damn house?" asked the man.

"All rentals are final, Sweet."

"Why'd I waste my damn money on that big place if no one's going to appreciate the beach. You're the ones who wanted to be walking distance even though it cost twice as much."

"We do appreciate the beach, isn't that right?" The mother turned her head to look at the boy and he nodded.

A young man walked by with a metal cart. "Drinks and ice-cream," he called out. "Drinks and ice-cream."

"Come over here," said the man. "What do you have?"

"It's all written on the front."

The man scanned the front of the cart. "We'll take three lemon sodas." He dug around the bag for the handful of bills.

"Fifteen dollars," said the young man with the cart.

"What about ten?"

"The price is written on the front."

"All I've got is ten. Can you do ten?"

"I don't think so."

"Ten is a fair price. Come on, buddy. We're dying over here."

The young man shook his head and pulled three drinks out of the ice. The man took the bottles. The glass was cold and dripping. He lifted up one of his flip flops. There was a bottle opener built into the foam of the sole. He popped the caps off the drinks.

"Number twenty-six. The worst a person can ever tell you is no. And no is never final."

The boy sipped his lemon soda. The sour tasted stronger than the sweet. There was a bitter aftertaste, like the water had been soaked in the rind of the fruit prior to carbonation. He picked at the edge of the label until he was able to slowly peel it from the bottle.

"Yours didn't peel clean," said the man. There was still glue and paper residue where the label had been. "It's like peeling an orange in one try. It takes technique. Finesse." He loosened the edge from his bottle, shook his wrists out, and then tore with a single stroke. Half of the underside remained glued to the glass. He bunched up what he had freed into his fists. The boy looked out at the ocean. The waves were very far out. He would have to run quick across the hot sand to meet them.

The man looked at the boy and then gazed out at the water too. He leaned back into his chair until it looked as though he might tip over. "You want to know a real-life lesson, son? Here you go. Women will make you do stupid shit."

"Don't say shit," called the mother.

"Let me teach the boy a lesson. When I was in college, I transferred to a different school to be with this girl. We broke up a month later."

"Did you transfer back?" asked the boy.

"No. I love my alma mater," said the man. "Go Broads."

"Then what part is the stupid shit?" asked the boy.

"Don't make me beat your ass in front of those girls over there," said the mother. In front of the nearest umbrella, two girls were digging a sand-castle. Their father watched them from his chair and smoked cigarettes. Their mother was on a beach towel too. The boy had not noticed them.

"The stupid shit was that I did it for her," said the man. "Pay attention."

"Did you love her?" asked the mother.

"No way," said the man.

"Why'd you transfer then?" asked the boy.

"She really knew how to take it," said the man. He elbowed the boy. "That'll make any man crazy. You already know what I'm talking about."

"Don't be disgusting," said the mother.

"If he knows what I'm talking about, what's the harm?"

"Would you transfer for me?"

"Hell, I'd transfer to the moon for that," he said, reaching over to grab a handful of her behind.

"What number was that?" asked the boy.

"Twenty-two."

"Will you spray me with some more of that tanning oil?" she asked the man.

"What's the SPF?" he asked.

"Five."

They sat under the umbrella for a long time. The mother fell asleep in the sun. The oil cooked on her skin, crisping it further bronze. She had tanned for the past two weeks in their front lawn. The wind blew and brought the smell of coconuts and shea from her back to the boy's nose. It reminded him of the tropical shaved ice he'd eaten for dessert a few nights ago.

"I'm going to marry your mother," the man said. "I wanted to let you know that this time it's going to happen."

The boy fidgeted with the bottle.

"How's your father doing? I've always respected that man. He's a genius."

"He's doing fine."

"He should come along next time,"

"He doesn't much care for the beach. He thinks it's trashy."

"Well maybe he should have taken you all anyway. Maybe that was the issue. Maybe that was what did it. Did you ever think about that?"

The girls from the umbrella ahead had gone into the ocean. They splashed around near the breakers, holding on to lime green foam boards that lifted them up over the crests of the waves.

"I'm not going to apologize for being honest. A real father takes his family to the beach. That's another one. Make sure to write that down."

The boy wondered at the hundreds of blue umbrellas that lined the sand. Each one had its own plastic chairs and plastic cooler and its own boy and its own mother lying on a towel and its own man leaning back in a chair, who could dictate the rules of life for the sake of those under the umbrella. He wondered how these compared to the man's the next one over, or if perhaps they all came out the same, agreed upon ahead of time by the renters and the hagglers and the umbrella-providers. Lesson 25. Lesson 53. Lesson 108.

"Were you raised wrong?" asked the man. "I'm talking to you. Show some respect. Don't forget to write that one down."

■

Canal Day

The three graduates of Belmont High School were all home for winter break. It was a Thursday and it was still morning. They were in Macaulay's house standing around in the kitchen. The boy's father turned a blind eye to their drinking because he wanted to do it too, not even a blind eye but often right in the middle of it, pouring out drinks from the top shelf of his liquor cabinet, asking had they ever heard of this one before? Macaulay had one of those bottles out now. He poured the clear liquid into three glasses and then got out another bottle and mixed that in too, a dark brown one that made the room smell like a café, like the ones each was familiar with at university. He plopped in ice cubes and folded down the tip of a half and half carton. The thick white of the creamer dominated all the other colors in the glass.

"These are called White Russians," Macaulay said.

"I know what they're called," said Andre. "You're not the only person in a film class right now."

"You don't know what classes he's in," said Emilia.

"Film class is the only place an-eighteen-year-old hears about White Russians," said Andre.

Macaulay leaned his head against the cold tile of the kitchen island. The original kitchen had not had one. His father called to have it installed the day he closed on the purchase. "No man is an island, but every man should have one," he'd said to the white walls of the kitchen.

"Hudson was the president of the film club at Belmont," said Emilia.

"Lot of good that did him," said Macaulay.

"How do you remember what clubs he was in?" asked Andre. "I don't even know what clubs you were in."

"I looked at it in the yearbook. I looked at it when I heard on Monday."

"Don't know why you would," said Macaulay. "You wouldn't have looked otherwise."

"Why does it matter if I would've looked otherwise?"

The walls of the kitchen were blank. There were pots and pans in the sink, filled up with red-brown water that resembled soup. There was a table with three chairs and the island with three stools. "Do we have to drink in this empty kitchen?" asked Andre. He licked the last drops out of his glass. "This was good. Let's have another one."

Macaulay picked up the first bottle and poured it into the other boy's glass. "I'm not making another White Russian for you. This is good by itself."

"Then I'll make it."

"No, you won't. It's my half and half and my empty kitchen."

"Hudson was going to minor in interior design," said Emilia.

"I'm going to drown you in the Hudson if you tell me one more thing about him," said Macaulay.

"That's not funny," said Emilia.

"I'm not going for laughs. I'm making you all drinks."

"Not anymore," said Andre.

Macaulay got up from the island and went over to the refrigerator. He got out the carton of half and half and waved it around in front of Andre. He bent down the tip and sloshed creamer into the boy's glass.

"What are the movie times for shows this afternoon?" asked Macaulay.

"We could go to a morning matinee," said Emilia. "That way we won't miss the vigil."

"It can't be a matinee if it's in the morning. And it can't be a vigil if it's in the afternoon," said Macaulay.

"It's the middle of December. It'll be dark enough for candles. It gets dark around four," said Emilia.

"It's still a matinee if it's in the morning. It just has to be daytime," said Andre.

"I've only heard it for afternoon movies," said Macaulay.

"Matinee is French for morning," said Emilia. "Let's go see a morning morning."

"It's too early. We need to get breakfast," said Macaulay. "Let's walk into town and get something to eat."

"Can't we eat something here?" asked Emilia. "You always want to eat out."

"I don't want to sit around here making eggs. That's too much work for just a bite to eat."

"There's nowhere to put the pan or plates when we're done," said Andre. "We'd have to start throwing plates away."

"Do you want to clean?" asked Macaulay. "I can get you a sponge."

"It's not my kitchen," said Andre.

"Do we have to go out again?" asked Emilia. "I don't want to spend any more money."

"I'm sick of people who went to Belmont saying they don't have enough money," said Macaulay. "Where did it go all of a sudden? How come it always comes back in time for you to leave for school in Boston each semester?"

"I don't want to spend any more money."

"Let's go to the Fill Up," said Andre. "You won't spend more than four dollars."

"I don't want breakfast from a gas station."

“You don’t know what you want,” said Macaulay. He pulled an amber bottle from his father’s cabinet. He removed a flask and a tiny, sterling funnel from the back of the shelf.

“Let’s get breakfast at the Grovewood,” said Emilia. “Or the Country Boy Diner.”

Macaulay pocketed the flask. It was etched with his father’s initials and a bow-tied terrier. He opened the front door and walked out. Emilia and Andre followed behind him. They tripped down the driveway and onto the sidewalk. The grass from the lawns was flush with the concrete. Above them were oak trees as old as the city. They walked out of the Gibbons Park neighborhood zoning area and into the first blocks of the downtown where the Fill Up stood on a street corner.

The Fill Up was just a gas station and the Fill Up was not its official name. There was a counter inside next to the pay window where people could get scrambled eggs or a burger to eat for a few dollars. There were a few chairs by the window but no table. An older man with plastic tubes running from his nostrils to a small machine sat slumped into two chairs. Macaulay had not seen the chairs empty once since he’d moved into the neighborhood with his father.

“You’re back again,” said the man to Macaulay. “Thought you were supposed to be away at university.”

“We’re off from school right now.”

“You’re always off from school. What is it for this time, Canal Day?”

“There’s no such thing as Canal Day.”

“I’m not sure how you would know that. Young people don’t know anything about canals. You don’t deserve the day off if you can’t celebrate it properly.”

“We’ll have three sausage biscuits,” said Macaulay to the woman at the window. The woman placed three frozen sausage patties in a microwave.

"Are you going to the vigil?" asked the man in the chairs.

"What's the point of a vigil?" said Macaulay.

"We're going to try and make it," said Emilia. "It's still hard to believe."

"He used to joke about it sometimes," said Andre.

"He liked to joke around a lot," said Macaulay.

"He always said he didn't have the constitution for it."

"That's not funny," said Emilia.

"He always said that."

"Well, it's not funny."

The woman in the window handed them three sausage biscuits. They were slightly cold in the center. "I wanted a chicken biscuit," said Emilia.

"Feel free to buy one," said Macaulay.

"Do you have to be like this all of the time?"

"Let's go back to your place," said Andre. "We can have another White Russian before your dad wakes up."

"It's almost noon," said Emilia. "There's time enough for a few rounds before that happens."

"Pay me back for that biscuit," said Macaulay. "We're going into town now."

"I want another drink," said Andre. Macaulay passed him the flask.

The older man stared at the wall. The machine at his feet hummed like an air conditioner. He closed his eyes and slumped further into the chairs.

"Are you going to the vigil?" Emilia asked him. The man didn't say anything, though he did not look to be asleep. Just resting his eyes.

"Let's go into town," said Andre.

The three stayed on the sidewalk and kept moving. They passed the flask around when the street looked empty. They passed a café serving brunch. It was modeled after a French café and had a menu with cursive writing with all the ingredients written out in French. It had a bakery that made fresh bread. Baskets of loaves lined the window. Emilia stared. She said "patisserie" under her breath. They kept walking.

"What movie are we going to see?" asked Macaulay.

"Let's watch *God's Not Dead 2*," said Andre.

"I haven't seen the first one yet," said Macaulay.

"There's a showing at three o' clock," said Andre. "We can kill some time in the park."

"Can't we see something else?" asked Emilia.

"We planned to see this one. We were supposed to watch it last week. It's your fault we missed it."

"I wasn't the one who could barely make it out the door."

It was cold enough outside for snow. None of them had remembered to bring a hat. They trudged onward until they got to the park. It was a large spread of grass and trees in the middle of the city. A patch of gravestones was scattered in a single corner by a small fountain. Neatly paved asphalt paths were lined with wrought metal benches with markers for the families that had endowed them. Squirrels darted around the trashcans and under trees. They competed with starlings for loose crumbs.

Macaulay walked into a patch of grass and leaned against the closest tree trunk. Andre and Emilia sat across from him with their arms around their knees.

"Still plenty left," said Macaulay, flask in hand. The metal froze his fingertips.

"What's it like being back?" asked Andre. "I've been in town for almost two weeks now and I want to leave."

"It's good to see everyone," said Emilia. "I missed hanging out with my dad."

"As if we didn't know," said Macaulay.

"I didn't mean anything by it. I'm sorry."

"I forgive you for boring all of us."

"I didn't mean anything."

"I'm happy to be back," said Macaulay. "What a great city. What a great group of friends."

A car made its way up the strip of main road. It moved forward a little and then stopped at the light. There were three lights on the main road.

"The lights here take forever to change," said Emilia.

"The problem is the number. Too many lights," said Macaulay.

"I never said it was a problem at all," said Emilia. "Maybe I like sitting in traffic."

"The problem is that you move five feet and then you have to stop again," said Macaulay. "It makes me want to ram my car into a telephone pole."

"That's not funny," said Emilia.

"Hudson used to call it the Gibbons Park Canal System," said Andre.

"Guess he didn't care for Venice after all" said Macaulay.

"I can't stand you," said Emilia.

"Come on," said Andre. "Stop."

"I want to go home."

"It's Canal Day," said Macaulay. "We should be celebrating." He handed her the flask. She took it but did not look at him.

"Do you think that old sack lives in the Fill Up?" asked Andre. "Do you think he leases those chairs?"

"It's prime real estate. Right next to the chips," said Macaulay. He took his flask back.

"Why does everything have to hurt?" asked Emilia.

The sun began to drop.

"It's almost three," said Andre. "We don't want to miss the matinee."

"They're holding the vigil at the other end of the park," said Emilia.

"You're drunk," said Andre. "We need to go to the movie."

"You're both going to Hell," said Emilia. "God *is* dead. 2."

"I don't want to be late," said Macaulay.

"I'm serious. I'm upset."

"Come on. It's okay. I'll buy you a slush."

"They're called Slush Puppies. That's what the theater calls them."

"I'll buy you a Slush Puppy."

"I want a cherry one," said Emilia. They got up from the grass and walked towards the main road. "I'm going to cry."

"I'll get you a cherry one. I'll get you whichever one you want," said Macaulay. Emilia staggered forward. He caught her arm and steadied her. "Hey. I've got you."

"Give me your flask."

Macaulay kept the flask in his pocket.

"I don't want to miss anything," said Andre.

"I'm going to throttle you if you say another word," said Macaulay. Emilia laughed.

"Sorry for caring about the movie. Sorry for caring about the tradition," said Andre. But he stayed quiet after that.

"We'll be there soon," said Macaulay. "Don't even worry. We won't even miss the previews."

They stumbled along the sidewalk until they got to the theater, an historic building from back when the city had first gotten movies. It had not been renovated very many times. The inside floor was padded with thick green carpet the color of pickled olives. The plaster of the walls was cracked and looked a bit like chalk. There was a concession bar run by a single employee. Macaulay had seen the man many times. He served at the Domani, the Italian restaurant in Gibbons Park his father liked. A large sign made of yellow plastic hung above the man's head. It was filled with little black letters arranged to tell the menu and prices. Hotdogs spun inside in a case lit up a lurid yellow. A big metal machine labeled *Slush Puppies* stood immediately behind, red and blue ice churning in twin cylinders.

"Three tickets for the *God's Not Dead 2* matinee," said Macaulay.

"Matinees ended an hour ago," said the man. "It's evening prices now."

"It's three o' clock," said Macaulay. "You think that means its dinner time now? Should I go home and brush my teeth after the movie?"

"Tickets are ten dollars each," said the man.

Macaulay took out his wallet. "Just give me three of them. And three slushes."

"Which flavor?"

"The cherry ones. Unless cherry doesn't mean red anymore either."

"It does. And matinee means morning. As in, the time respectable people wake up to start their day."

"I'm going to climb over that counter," said Macaulay. "I'm going to break your neck against that hot dog machine."

"You think the cops'll be madder about the assault or the three drunk teenagers?"

"We just want to see the movie," said Andre. "We're sorry." He opened his wallet and paid for the tickets and drinks. He gripped Macaulay's wrists and pulled him towards the room where *God's Not Dead 2* was being screened.

They chose the seats farthest to the left in the very back row of the theater. There were ten other people already seated. They were all past sixty or else families with children. There were only a few previews left by the time they sat down. The chairs were hard plastic with rough fabric cushioning that had begun to rip in places. Macaulay leaned back into his seat and unscrewed his flask. He emptied the rest of it into his cherry slush. The red ice absorbed the amber liquid like a sponge.

"Didn't see a lot of previews," said Andre.

"Be quiet," said Macaulay. "I don't want to miss any of the plot."

The movie starts with a high-school professor teaching about Jesus during class. People complain that this is an issue of separation of church and state because it's a public school and the teacher has to go to court. There are various side plots where people unrelated to the case accept Jesus into their heart.

"We're going to prove once and for all that God is dead," said the man prosecuting the teacher.

"How's he going to do that?" asked Andre.

“Jurisprudence like you wouldn’t believe,” said Macaulay.

“Stop talking,” hissed the father of one of the families.

Macaulay took a long sip of his slush. Emilia got out of her chair. She walked past the empty rows of seats towards the door of the room.

The movie went on for some time. The teacher gained some ground in the courthouse. The prosecutor waved his hands around and made a big show of hating Christianity.

“Where’s Emilia?” asked Macaulay.

“Long line for concessions,” said Andre.

“Stop it. Where do you think she went?”

“To the vigil?”

“She’s drunk.”

“I bet she’s going to speak. She’s one to give a speech drunk.”

` “We need to go.”

The two jumped out of their seats and ran out the door towards the exit. The sun was low and the sky had begun to darken, though there was still some lightness behind the trees, a soft purple not yet deepened into night. It was colder than before. They ran to the park, past iron gates and onto the neat sidewalks. At the far end of the park they could make out the dotted light of candles. They ran faster.

Emilia was swaying back and forth in the center of a circle of bodies. The graduating class of Belmont High School from two years back were gathered with current students and family members and unrelated members of the community who subscribed to the local paper and read the news for themselves that Monday. The people in the circle held crisp sheets of manila.

Macaulay read over a person's shoulders. *In Memoriam: Hudson Barrentine. The brightest star of Gibbons Park. Everything he did, he did well, and he did everything. We will miss his laugh most of all.* Emilia clutched her candle with both hands, spilling hot wax onto her fingertips as she wobbled around. She was speaking loudly.

"I don't understand," she said. "He was the president of the film club. He was going to major in interior design." Her cheeks were smeared and streaked with black. "I didn't know him. I'm sorry."

Emilia swayed back and forth for a few more seconds before walking out of the center. Macaulay walked up behind her and tapped her arm.

"Let's go," he said. Familiar faces turned towards them but nobody smiled. Macaulay blew out her candle and grabbed her hand. Andre followed behind them as they walked towards the opposite end of the park. With the vigil in the distance, Emilia broke free and ran towards the gravestones that stood in a clump near the entrance. She sprawled across a long flat headstone. Macaulay and Andre sat down on either side of her.

"I love you both," said Emilia. "I need you to stay in my life forever."

"I'll call a taxi," said Andre. They each held one of her hands.

"I'm going to throw up," said Emilia. The purple of the sky stood stark against the barren branches of the trees above their heads.

By the time Macaulay got home, there was still a little bit of light left. The straggling rays snuck through the windows of the kitchen. His father stood barefoot at the island in a thin, white undershirt. He was making himself a cup of coffee.

"Were you at the vigil?" he asked.

"Briefly. Emilia gave a toast," said Macaulay.

"Jesus. I know he was your friend. Jesus, that's terrible."

"We didn't really know him that well."

"As a parent, you worry about these things. I'm worried about you, son."

"You don't have to worry."

"What if that had been you?"

"It wasn't."

"I haven't been a great parent. I'm sorry for not being perfect."

"Nobody can be perfect."

"I'm sorry for not being good. I'm not good at all."

His father moved closer to him. They were now face to face. The man's eyes were red.

"Everyone gets it wrong sometimes," said Macaulay.

"Please don't give up on me," said the father.

Macaulay stared at the barren walls. Their old kitchen had been filled with paintings of fruit bowls and pictures of stylized silverware. His mother had taken it all to her apartment. He wondered what Hudson's parents were going to do with all of his things. Maybe they would keep everything on the walls, his room like it was when he'd left for university. Or maybe they would strip everything down until it looked like a storage closet.

"I won't," said Macaulay. I won't ever."

Macaulay felt unsteady on his feet but did not sit down. They stood at the island for a long time, without saying a word or looking at each other. Then Macaulay spoke.

"Let's see about going downtown," he said. "Get dinner someplace. The traffic should be cleared up by now."

In the Gibbons Park Canal System, the traffic lights remained red an additional eight seconds longer than any midsize city in the Upper South. Hudson had come up with that number, Macaulay remembered, while doing research for a school project. He'd calculated that the average resident would spend two additional days of their lifetime in traffic as a result of these few extra seconds. Hudson had published the findings in the local paper and few people paid attention. Both the mayor and the city council had never responded. Macaulay wondered if there was a surviving copy of the article. Emilia might like to read it.

There were eleven stop lights between his father's house and the downtown of the city. In the car that evening, they were not stopped once.

■